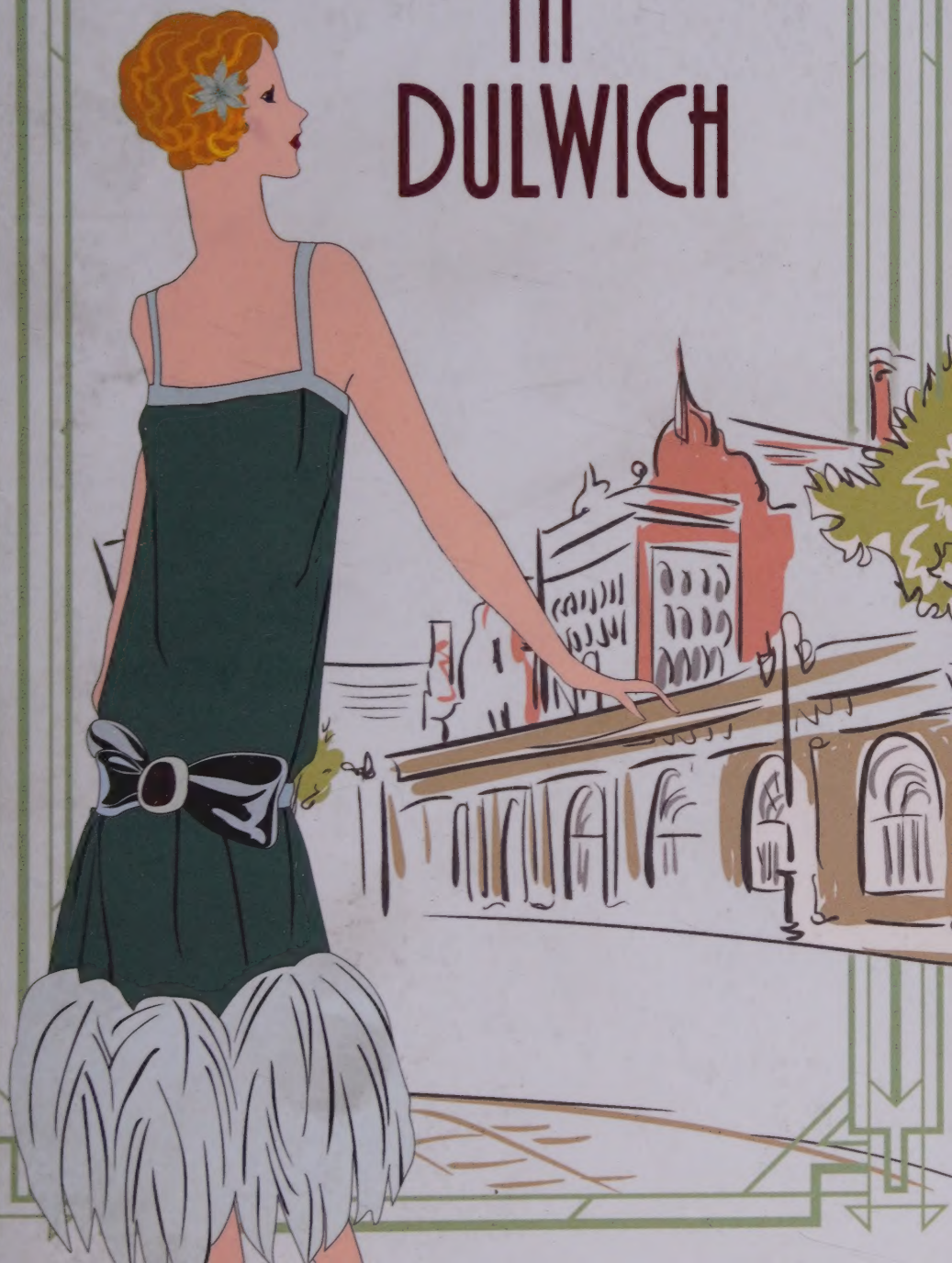


A DROWNING IN DULWICH



A Drowning in Dulwich


by

Lynda Wilcox


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WITHDRAWN



Chapter 1



On a bright Monday morning, the sleek Lagonda belonging to Lady Eleanor Bakewell sped through Mayfair and Belgravia, crossed the Thames at Vauxhall Bridge then tootled onwards into Camberwell, heading for the leafy suburb of Dulwich and the promise of two days of pampering for its occupants.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Lady Ann Carstairs rubbed her hands in anticipation.

“Isn’t this exciting, Eleanor. I hope you’re looking forward to it.” She had dark, fashionably shingled hair and a wide mouth — ideal for drinking cocktails and for laughing, both of which she did in abundance.

Eleanor smiled at her friend. “Perhaps not as much as you are. It will, I hope, be an interesting experience, and the chance to relax is welcome.”

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy. It will be fun, and after a weekend of solid partying, my body is in urgent need of a rest. Besides, I’m looking forward to seeing Diana again and trying these wondrous treatments she talked about.”

Diana Cuthbert was a friend from their pre-war finishing school, who now worked as a beautician at the Cuthbert Clinic, owned and run by her mother, Irene. The clinic sold cosmetics and skin creams based on recipes that Irene claimed came from Ancient Egypt; it also offered facials, massages, dietary regimes, and more.

Eleanor, sceptical of these claims, had agreed to accompany her friend more out of a desire to meet an old chum than to undergo any treatments in an effort to gild the lily.

"Did you say the whole family was engaged in the business? How many Cuthberts are there? I can't remember."

Ann nodded and brushed a speck of dust from her skirt. "Oh, there's a complete tribe. Diana has two sisters and a brother, and they're all involved in one way or another. Health and Beauty is a booming business. I rather wish I'd thought of it myself, instead of becoming a party planner."

"I shouldn't worry. You're doing very well."

"Yes, I shouldn't grumble. Ever since the British Empire Exhibition opened in Wembley last month, I've been rushed off my feet organising parties. People are pouring into London, meeting up with friends, and everyone wants to party. I'm exhausted and need this break."

"I'm glad to hear you are doing so well. Besides, you're the gregarious type and a good organiser, so you're definitely in the right job."

Having set herself up as a private enquiry agent, Eleanor wasn't so sanguine about her own career, feeling that it was not the best use of her time and talents, despite having solved two high profile murder cases, reclaimed a king's ransom in stolen jewellery, and defeated a gang of spies planning to assassinate a European politician — all within the last five months.

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Ann said. "I enjoy my work, though it does wear me to a frazzle at times. Some clients can be very picky, you know, and it was a party for one of the finicky sort when I met Diana again and wangled this invitation. Frankly, it will be good to put myself into the Cuthberts' care and be coddled and indulged for two days. Diana says they have a first-rate cook and the food is excellent."

Eleanor laughed. "Except if you're on a regime and trying to lose weight."

"Ah, but we're both slim enough, so that shouldn't be a problem."

The traffic started to build as they approached the outskirts of Dulwich, and Eleanor slowed the Lagonda as she checked road and street signs for their destination. Ann, too, leaned forward and peered through the windscreen.

"Diana says it's the first on the left, just past the entrance to the tennis club."

"That's just ahead, I think."

Eleanor made the left turn and drove down a wide avenue lined with plane trees.

"There it is, at the bottom." Ann pointed to the end of the street. "That set of gates leads to Cuthbert House."

A small brass plaque on the right hand pillar proclaimed the premises as The Cuthbert Clinic, and Eleanor nosed the Lagonda between the gates and up to a porticoed entrance.

"Wow. This place is vast. Much bigger than I expected."

"Pretty imposing, isn't it?" Ann agreed. "I wonder how many bedrooms it has. Maybe we'll have to share."

"I wouldn't mind that, but I could just as easily not stay over. It isn't that far to drive from Piccadilly."

"Don't you dare! The whole idea was to get out of London for some much needed rest and relaxation and the clinic offers residential care as well as one-off treatments. We're only here for two nights. Don't back out on me now."

Eleanor laughed at Ann's worried face. "I shan't abandon you, darling. Besides, look at all those windows. They've probably got more bedrooms than the Ritz. Come on." She opened the car door. "I'll get the bags, and then we'll see who's at home."

From this angle and elevation, the house appeared to be a long rectangle with rooms extending either side of the front door. Discounting the one above the door which might be situated on a landing, Eleanor had counted ten windows on the upper floor, giving the house at least that many bedrooms and possibly twice that number.

A large iron bell-pull hung by the door.

Ann gave it a good tug and they heard it jangle inside. Within moments the door was opened by a slim man in a butler's uniform. He was young and attractive with sleek blond hair, and not the aged retainer usually found in such a lofty position. He sketched a brief bow and smiled down at them.

"Lady Eleanor Bakewell and Lady Ann Carstairs? Do come in. Miss Diana is expecting you."

Eleanor and Ann exchanged glances and stepped into a marble-floored hall. Laughter echoed on the landing above them, swiftly followed by the tap of heels as a tall dark-haired young woman swept down the upper staircase, turned on the half-landing, and came to meet them, arms outstretched.

"Ann, Eleanor, how lovely to see you again."

She hurried towards them, face wreathed in smiles, and pressed her cheek to both of theirs in turn.

"Hello, Diana. How are you? Golly, it's ages since we met."

"Isn't it?" Diana turned to the butler. "Cripps, please have their ladyships' coats and bags taken up to their rooms. I've put them in Rose and Hyacinth. Then, would you bring a pot of coffee to the drawing room, please?"

He murmured an assent and once divested of their outer wear, Eleanor and Ann followed their friend into a room on the right-hand side of the hall.

Here, they took seats in comfortable armchairs and settled in for a long chat and a catch-up.

At twenty-five, Diana was a year older than her visitors, slim and vivacious, with a tumbling mane of chestnut hair and brown eyes under well-defined brows. Eleanor, who hadn't seen her since they parted company at Waterloo Station having just got off the boat train from France, thought she had aged well. Unless it was all due to the Cuthberts' lotions and potions.

"So," Diana said when the coffee had arrived, "are you two still ladies of leisure? What are you doing with yourselves these days?" She poured out from a silver pot and handed the cups to her guests.

"Well, you know I'm a party organiser, I told you that when we met at the Fanshaws' bash."

"That's right, so you did. What about you, Eleanor? I suppose you spent the war on the ducal estates, did you?"

Eleanor, daughter of the Duke of Bakewell, had done nothing of the sort, though she wasn't prepared to tell Diana that. Even Ann wasn't aware of all that her friend had got up to during those dark days.

"Partly, though I did train to be a motor mechanic and learned to service and repair military vehicles and staff cars."

"Ugh! All that grease." A shiver rippled Diana's shoulders. "Your poor hands. I shall have to have a look at those while you are here and give you a lovely manicure."

Eleanor laughed. "It's been nearly six years since the war, Diana. I think my hands have recovered by now."

"Tell her what you're doing now, Eleanor," Ann urged. "Tell her about your adventures."

"Hmm." Eleanor scowled and sipped at her coffee.

"Yes, do," Diana agreed. "It sounds exciting, whatever it is."

"She's far too modest." Ann said, when Eleanor remained silent. "She's a private detective, and a jolly good one, too."

Eleanor waved a forefinger from side to side. "You flatter me, and I'm a private enquiry agent, not a detective."

"Pshaw. It amounts to the same thing, and you've solved some pretty important cases." Ann turned to Diana. "She's twice beaten Chief Inspector Blount of Scotland Yard at his own game and solved crimes that had him baffled."

"Stop it, Ann." A blush spread over Eleanor's pale cheeks. "Never mind me, what about you, Diana? Is the clinic a recent venture? Are all your family involved?"

"Well, Mother no longer administers the treatments, except to a few clients of long standing. She remains in overall charge, of course."

Was there a degree of resentment in that statement? Eleanor thought so, and wondered what sort of relationship the family members had with each other.

"What about the rest of the family?"

"Yes, they all work here, applying the treatments, putting mother's ideas into practice." Diana stopped and steepled her fingers. "You see, before the war, mother spent some time in Egypt and learned a lot about the beauty secrets of the ancient Egyptians. She met Doctor Bernstein while she was out there, and again in Switzerland on her way home from the East, and together they developed the cosmetics and treatments using the same ancient ingredients, but modern equipment. The clinic was opened in 1920 and myself, Eugenie, Persephone, and Raphael all work here, in one capacity or another."

Eleanor felt an urge to giggle, not only at the flamboyant names Mrs Cuthbert had bestowed upon her offspring, but also at the thought of her discovering the secrets of Ancient Egypt. She risked a glance at Ann who appeared to be nodding enthusiastically, and buried her nose in her coffee cup.

"Does this Doctor Bernstein work here as well?" Ann asked.

"Yes, mother brought him home with her from Switzerland and he now has a laboratory upstairs here, built over the kitchens next to the Egyptian pool."

"What on earth is that?"

Diana waved a hand. "It's our indoor swimming pool and mother's pride and joy. She's hoping to offer spa treatments there in the future. Anyway, I'll take you to see it later when I show you around." She replaced her cup and saucer on the tray. "As to Doctor Bernstein, he is continually developing new products, and has little to do with our clients, so you are unlikely to see him except during dinner." She got up

and crossed to a walnut bureau on a side wall and returned with a couple of brochures. "Perhaps you'd like to have a look at these."

Eleanor put out a hand for the proffered booklet and flicked through the pages, hiding a smile at some of the names that someone in the family had bestowed upon their products. Cleopatra's Cleansing Cream, for example, sounded interesting, though unless it was made from asses' milk, was unlikely to have anything to do with the last Pharaoh of Egypt – and the story of asses' milk was probably apocryphal.

"As you can see," Diana said, "we have a range of treatments to deeply cleanse the skin, or to remove bags and wrinkles." She smiled at her friends. "That's for older ladies, obviously, I'm not saying you need them."

"Oh, I don't know," Ann murmured. "With all the parties I go to, I'm beginning to show signs of wear."

Diana smiled. "It's all the alcohol on offer. Drink a glass of water before bed and get a good night's sleep, that will help to combat the effects of any...ah...overindulgence."

"I'll try, but when it comes to a good night's sleep, chance would be a fine thing."

"We also sell cosmetics under the brand name of Nile Queen. There are skin creams in the Cleopatra range, and a less expensive range of lipsticks, rouge, eyeliner, and mascara in the Nefertiti range."

"Ooh, that all sounds fabulous." Ann wagged her dark brows at Eleanor.

"Well," Diana went on, "you can take these brochures with you up to your rooms, and decide on your treatments later. Presently I'll give you the grand tour." She got to her feet. "Come along. If you've finished your coffee, I'll show you to your rooms."



Chapter 2



Eleanor found the interior of her bedroom as delightful as the 'Rose' name plaque on the door suggested. The white coverlet on the bed was dotted with pale pink buds, and someone had even thought to put a bowl of the fragrant blooms on the window ledge.

She sat on the bed, pleased to find the mattress good and firm, the sheets clean and the pillows plentiful, and wondered what to make of their interview with Diana.

Ever since Howard Carter's wonderful discoveries in the Valley of the Kings high above the Nile, the world had gone mad for King Tutankhamun. Only last year a duo calling themselves *The Happiness Boys* had recorded a song named *Old King Tut* and both a jeweller in Bond Street and a couturier in Regent Street were offering Egyptian-themed designs. It was probably only a matter of time before the cosmetics industry followed suit, and Irene Cuthbert had stolen a march on many a bigger-named, and more affluent, company.

Eleanor, however, considered it a bold claim that supposed Egyptian beauty treatments, as opposed to mere powder and paint, would work wonders on modern women. It was more likely — the cynic in her said — that they were harnessing the craze for their own ends, and the family's financial gain. She shrugged. So what? Everyone had a living to earn.

Ann, who was next door in 'Hyacinth', walked in a few minutes later, a broad smile on her face.

"Ooh, this is nice," she said. "Aren't you glad you decided to come? Have you decided on your treatments, yet?"

"I don't know." A frown creased her brow. "Do you believe all this nonsense about beauty secrets of Ancient Egypt?"

"Well, I don't see why not. The archaeologists are making some fascinating discoveries out there, you know. Just look at King Tut's tomb."

Her words echoed Eleanor's own thoughts, but Irene Cuthbert was not an archaeologist, nor yet a scientist, and Eleanor's naturally suspicious mind was wary of undergoing any treatment that relied on ancient wisdom rather than medical science.

Eleanor shrugged. "Do you know anyone who's had one of these treatments?"

"No, I don't. The first I heard of this place was when I met Diana again at that party. Why? Do you think I should have asked around and checked it out?"

"It might have been wise. Personal recommendation from someone you trust, and all that."

"Well, I'm sorry." Ann pouted. "I just liked the sound of a little pampering, that's all. You don't have to join in if you don't want to."

Eleanor jumped off the bed and put an arm through her friend's. "We'll see. I am looking forward to seeing the rest of house, so we'd better go down for the grand tour."

Diana awaited them at the bottom of the stairs, her back to the main door. "Are your rooms satisfactory? I hope you like them."

"They're lovely," Ann said, with genuine enthusiasm. "The flowers are a really nice touch. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now then, all the rooms on my right are family rooms. You've been in the drawing room and the dining room is right next to it, through that door, there." Diana pointed to a spot beyond Eleanor's left ear. "Similarly upstairs, all the bedrooms along the right hand corridor belong to the family and Doctor Bernstein." She waved her left hand at the opposite side of the hall. "Everything on this side

is business and the door over there that corresponds with the drawing room, is mother's office."

She led the way down a corridor behind the office, Eleanor and Ann trooping behind, and opened a couple of doors.

"These are our treatment rooms."

Her companions peered inside and Eleanor was pleased to note how clean they were. Clean and, with their white painted walls, almost stark. A small vase of flowers offset the clinical feel to the rooms — it might be called a clinic, but Cuthbert House would not be mistaken for a hospital.

Each room was equipped with a long table covered with a white sheet, and a trolley loaded with all a beautician's paraphernalia — tweezers, scissors, brushes, cotton wool, sponges, and pots, jars, and bottles of various sizes. Everything was neatly laid out and even Eleanor admitted to herself that it all looked very professional.

"What's in the other rooms further down?" Ann asked, as Diana pulled the doors closed and turned to go back the way they had come.

"The same, but Eugenie and Persephone have clients in there at the moment."

Back in the main hall, she approached a set of double doors underneath the staircase. These led into another corridor, though this time the pale cream walls had a border of blue and green, and were studded with pictures of women in Ancient Egyptian dress.

"Ooh! These are pretty," Ann said. "I love these fashions. Phoebe Mortlake wore a stunning creation very like some of these at a party the other night."

Eleanor laughed. "She would. Phoebe's never been one to shun attention. Did she also have a large male servant following her with an ostrich feather fan?"

"No, but she'd have wangled that if she'd thought of it." Ann laughed. "Isn't it odd how all these people are shown in profile. Have you noticed? None of them are actually facing you."

"That's the way the Ancient Egyptians painted them," Diana said. "Go and have a look in the British Museum."

They were approaching another set of double doors when Eleanor stopped, her attention caught by a particular figure.

"Isn't that you, Diana?"

Their hostess, seeing the figure that Eleanor regarded, coloured slightly. "Ha! Well spotted. Yes it is."

"Who painted these?"

"My brother, Raphael. He's very artistic."

"And very talented," Ann put in.

Diana nodded. "If he'd had his way he would have been an artist, I think. He's very creative."

"So, what stopped him."

"Oh, Mother." She grimaced. "She told him that no son of hers would starve in a garret, and that he was needed, and would be better off, working for the family business."

Judging from the work on show, Eleanor wasn't so sure of that, but it was none of her affair.

"Did he also make that copy of the bust of Nefertiti on the wooden plinth at the turn of the stairs? I noticed that when we went up to our rooms."

"Yes, that's Raphael's work."

"I noticed it, too," Ann said. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you. He'll be delighted you think so."

Diana strode ahead to pull open the doors and smiled at the gasps from her companions.

"Wow! This is amazing!"

They entered a rectangular pillared hall, perhaps forty feet in length, its walls again adorned with brightly coloured frescoes in the Egyptian style. Light filtered in from a glass roof high above and cast flickering reflections upon the tiled pool of warm water at the room's

centre. It danced on the walls, giving the painted figures the appearance of movement, making them come alive.

While Ann enthused over everything — even going so far as to dip a toe into the water — and bemoaning the fact that she hadn't thought to pack a bathing costume, Eleanor wondered how much it had all cost and wished she'd paid closer attention to the prices in the brochure Diana had given her.

"Is the pool used as part of the treatments?" she asked. She approached the edge of the pool where a set of wide, shallow steps, one set at every side, led down into the water.

"Yes, with the addition of some of our own preparations. It is heated, as you can tell," — she wiped a film of moisture from above an eyebrow — "to a temperature of around 75 degrees."

"How do you do that?" asked Ann. She gazed longingly at the water.

"Much like any other heating system, I'd imagine. Don't ask me, I'm no engineer. At any rate, it uses a prodigious amount of firewood and coal." She sighed and shook her head. "However, I must ask you both not to come down here alone. For safety's sake we insist on two people in the Egyptian pool at all times."

That made sense, and Eleanor nodded. "Of course."

"Yes, all right," Ann agreed, though she scowled.

"Thank you," Diana said, starting to retrace her steps. Eleanor stopped her.

"What's through the end set of doors, Diana?"

"What? Oh, the garden, though there's not much to see there yet, apart from a few herbs for the kitchen and some medicinal plants. Persephone is the gardener in the family. She's trying to grow roses so that she can make rose water, but I think they are the wrong type. She was muttering the other day about getting shrub roses instead of climbers."

She shrugged, as though the vagaries of rose-growing held little interest, or were beyond her.

They walked back through the painted passage. It was wide enough for two people to walk abreast and Eleanor and Ann went ahead as their friend pulled the pool doors closed behind them.


"Wow! Look at these figures on this side!" Ann nudged Eleanor. "Aren't they weird? They've all got human bodies with animal heads."

"And birds, although that one looks like a woman."


"That's Isis," Diana said from behind them. "Raphael decided to paint a few of the ancient gods. I think they are rather grotesque, but he said some of them were apposite. Sekhmet, the figure with a lioness's head is the goddess of healing, for example, as is Isis."

"And that one?" Ann pointed to a figure. "The one with the dog's head."

"It's actually a jackal. It's Anubis. I don't know why Raphael chose that one. I think it was his idea of a joke. Anubis was the ancient Egyptian god of the dead."



Chapter 3



Three members of the Cuthbert family were already in the drawing room when Eleanor and Ann entered at twenty minutes to seven. Besides Diana, a tall young man — Raphael, Eleanor surmised — chatted to an older lady who had to be their mother. She did not look up at their entrance, but continued to scowl at her son, making her points by jabbing a finger onto the arm of her chair.

“How many times must I tell you? You need to pull your weight here first, before you may do as you please. I won’t have any son of mine wasting his time on such Bohemian nonsense.”

Diana came forward to greet them, a flush of embarrassment on her cheeks.

“Hello, you two. As you can see, we aren’t all here yet. Let me get you a drink, then I’ll make the introductions.”

Eleanor and Ann asked for vodka martinis and Diana, clearly ill at ease, busied herself at the drinks cabinet.

“Do you think we’ve called at a bad time?” Ann whispered.

Acutely aware of Diana’s discomfiture, Eleanor silenced Ann with a quick shake of the head.

By the time that Diana returned with their drinks, Mrs Cuthbert had ceased berating Raphael, and was staring in their direction.

“Mother, may I present my friends Lady Eleanor Bakewell and Lady Ann Carstairs?”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mrs Cuthbert’s tone suggested no pleasure.

Eleanor noted the hard eyes and the crimped lips and subjected herself to the calculating stare.

"You remember, we met at finishing school," Diana went on. "Eleanor is the Duke of Bakewell's daughter."

Never liking to be introduced by her parentage, Eleanor made a valiant effort to keep the smile on her face. Diana could be forgiven for what otherwise might have been a social faux pas. She must know her mother well enough to think that a guest's heritage would influence her. It appeared that it did, for the lips curved into something that on someone not so hard-faced as Mrs Cuthbert, would have been taken for a smile.

"Of course I remember. Your mother was a dancer, wasn't she?"

Ann coughed, nearly spilling her drink. Eleanor murmured, "She was."

It was akin to calling the Crown Jewels a collection of baubles for, before her marriage, Svetlana, duchess of Bakewell, had been prima ballerina assoluta with the Imperial Russian Ballet. She had reached the pinnacle of her career, her performances praised from Moscow to St. Petersburg, before she had — in her own words — run away with a dashing English duke.

Mrs Cuthbert's offhand remark might have been a deliberate snub, but Eleanor gave her the benefit of the doubt. Not everyone was an expert in the field of Russian ballet. Frankly, she was surprised the woman had sufficient idea of the duchess's background to make any comment on it, let alone such a dismissive one.

The arrival of Diana's sisters, together with a tall dark-haired man, changed Mrs Cuthbert's focus.

"Ah, here you are," she said. "Get yourselves a drink, if you must. It's almost time we went into dinner."

There was a strong family resemblance within the Cuthbert clan. All had slim noses and pointed chins and, with the exception of Perse-

phone whose hair was a deep shade of auburn, the same chestnut locks. Eugenie alone had her hair styled into a fashionable shingle.

Diana made the introductions again, this time without reference to either of the guests' forebears, and Eleanor smiled and said hello to everyone and shook the hand that Doctor Bernstein offered.

He appeared to be a few years older than Mrs Cuthbert, perhaps in his late fifties, but where the latter appeared hard and waspish, the doctor's welcome was warm and genuine.

"Hello. A pleasure to meet you, ladies. You are here for our treatments, yes?" He had a cultured voice with a trace of a middle-European accent.

"Yes," Ann replied. "We're old school friends of Diana's."

"Not old, surely." His eyes behind a pair of steel rimmed spectacles twinkled at them. "You have not yet reached an age where our products are necessary, though our cosmetics are very popular with all ages."

Eleanor thought that was remarkably honest of him. She wondered how well he got on with his employer, and if she approved of such frankness.

She was all set to ask him about the clinic's products when the booming of a gong put paid to further conversation, at least for the moment.

"Come, everyone."

Mrs Cuthbert rose from her chair enrobed in a dress of maroon silk that showed off a still slim figure. To Eleanor's well trained eye, the shape owed more to good posture and better corsetry than to exercise and diet, and from under her blonde fringe she took stock of Diana's mother.

Mrs Cuthbert was not the best advertisement for her products. Her skin, especially around the eyes, was heavily wrinkled from having spent too long in a hot and sunny climate. Her hands, however, were still soft and white. Eleanor guessed she had taken the precaution of wearing

gloves while on her travels and wondered, if that were the case, why she also hadn't employed a parasol.

As the family fell into line behind her mother, Diana gathered up her friends and they walked into the hall, where the double doors to the dining room stood open. Inside, a table had been set for eight, with Irene at the head opposite Doctor Bernstein. Eleanor found herself between Diana and Ann and opposite Eugenie. Raphael sat on his mother's left, and Persephone on the doctor's right.

The meal consisted of three courses — soup, followed by a chicken salad and dessert. It was beautifully cooked and presented, and served by Cripps, together with a couple of maids.

Bottles of wine stood open on the table and the family were clearly used to helping themselves, passing the bottles, and a jug of water, up and down the table as needed.

Although the food was delicious, Eleanor soon lost her appetite when it became apparent that Mrs Cuthbert intended using the meal time to berate almost everyone present.

She started with Doctor Bernstein.

"Are you making progress on that new face cream, Emanuel? You should be done with it by now."

The doctor's dark eyebrows came down in a frown of annoyance. He swallowed a mouthful of soup before answering.

"These things take time, Irene. It is important to get the formula right."

"Well, make it soon. I've promised my customers this will be a revolution in skin care."

"Have I not warned you before about making promises? If the formulation is not precise there is a risk of damaging the skin. You do not want that."

"Allow me to know my own business." She glared at the doctor for a moment before turning her attention to her son.

"Have the month's sales figures improved?"

Raphael shrugged and topped up his wine glass. "I haven't done them yet."

"Then get onto it," Irene snapped. "This company will only stay afloat if we sell more products. We need another advertising campaign."

Diana squirmed in her chair next to Eleanor. "Bookings for treatments are up. I'm doing all I can to bring in new custom."

"That's all well and good, Diana." Eugenie crumbled a bread roll on her side plate. "But I've had cancellations."

Diana opened her mouth to reply, but her mother got in first.

"That's because you don't focus on your clients. You need to get silly romantic notions out of your head and stop mooning about and daydreaming. Don't forget who controls the purse strings. If you don't buck your ideas up, you and Raphael between you, I shall consider reducing both your allowances."

Persephone alone remained unscathed by her mother's onslaught, although she cast apprehensive glances up the table as she toyed with her salad as if expecting to be the focus of that waspish tongue at any moment.

Throughout these exchanges, Eleanor and Ann kept their attention on the food, risking only the occasional glance at each other.

Eleanor found it extraordinary, not only that Mrs Cuthbert should turn a family meal into a board meeting, but that she should do so in front of guests, and in front of the staff. There was a rudeness and a disrespect to the behaviour that Eleanor was unaccustomed to. Perhaps the clinic's owner had a lot on her mind. From the topic of the various conversations, it would seem so.

Throughout all this, the service had gone along smoothly. Dessert, when it came, was lemon meringue pie. It was not a favourite of Eleanor's who disliked lemons and who found the mix of acidity and sweetness too much for her teeth. Even the small portion in front of her was more than she felt like eating. Across the table, however, Eugenie

tucked into the somewhat larger portion that Cripps placed in front of her with evident pleasure.

Coffee was taken in the drawing room with Diana serving her mother and her guests and everyone else helping themselves.

Shortly afterwards, Mrs Cuthbert retired for the night, though not without a parting shot.

"I'm to my bed. Diana, Eugenie, and Persephone, don't you stay up until all hours. You are not a good advertisement for the clinic if you appear washed out and baggy-eyed in front of the clients."

Doctor Bernstein went with her, muttering about returning to his lab, and the younger members relaxed a little.

Raphael went to a gramophone in the corner and put on a record and invited Ann and Eleanor to dance with him.

"This tune's called *The Cleopatra Rag*," he said, as the music started to play. "Pretty fitting, don't you think? For a beauty clinic based on ancient Egyptian ingredients, I mean." He gave a boyish grin, clearly more at ease now that his mother was not around.

Almost by common consent between her children, she was not mentioned nor was any apology made for her lack of manners. Of course, Eleanor reflected with a thought as sour as her dessert, Mrs Cuthbert's boorishness might be such a regular occurrence that none of them thought anything of it.

The atmosphere was certainly lighter and happier in her absence, and the six of them spent a pleasant hour or two chatting about music, the latest theatrical hit and recently seen movies.

Even so, Eleanor did not object when, just before eleven o'clock they agreed to call it a night and everyone went upstairs.

"What a perfectly horrid woman," Ann muttered as they walked down the corridor towards their rooms. "Poor Diana, having a mother like that."

"It was an extraordinary performance." Eleanor voiced the opinion she'd formed at the time.

"Perhaps Mrs Cuthbert doesn't want our business."

Eleanor shook her head, dissatisfied with that explanation. "She could easily have told Diana not to extend the business to residential treatments, if she felt that way. It strikes me that the clinic might not be doing quite as well as we were led to believe. They all seemed very much on edge."

Ann stopped by her door. "Well, if Diana's brought us here under false pretenses, then I'm leaving in the morning. Wild horses won't keep me here if the treatments are a sham."

Eleanor agreed, unaware that the events next morning would keep the friends at Cuthbert House, whether they liked it or not.



Chapter 4



Eleanor woke in her room full of roses, and gave a leisurely stretch before she padded to the window and drew back the curtains. A bright and sunny morning met her gaze, the sort that catches out the unwary, making them think that summer has arrived when it was still two months away and — this being England — might not appear even then.

She lifted the sash and leaned out, hoping for a glimpse of the gardens, but most of her view was blocked by the roof of the swimming pool.

She was about to pull back in, when something flapped at the corner of her eye. She turned her head. Two lengths of blue cloth waved in the early morning air, trapped in a window away to her right.

She closed the sash and hurried to get washed and dressed, eager to see what the day would bring forth. As she slipped her feet into a pair of soft leather house shoes, footsteps thundered down the corridor outside her door. Disturbed, she wrenched the door open and peered out. Along the corridor, on the Cuthbert side of the house, a maid hammered against a door.

“Miss Diana, Miss Diana! Come quick, Mrs Cuthbert is drowned in the pool!”

Diana stepped into the corridor, still in her nightwear. “What’s that, Abi? What’s the matter?”

“It’s the mistress, Miss. She’s dead, Miss.”

"What? Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, Miss. She's drowned. Mr Cripps, he sent me to fetch you."

"All right, I'll be down in a minute. Go and let Doctor Bernstein know, will you? Tell him to join us, please." She disappeared inside her room again.

Closing her own door softly, Eleanor went downstairs and crossed the hall to the passage leading to the pool.

Could it really be true that Irene Cuthbert was dead? Obviously it had to be. It would be a rotten trick to play on Diana at any time, let alone this early in the morning, were it not so.

She began to regret, now that Irene was dead, the harsh opinion she had formed of her the previous evening. She had put that down to worries regarding the business. Were they so serious that Irene had taken her own life?

When Eleanor reached the pool she shivered, not only at the sight of the dead woman floating face down in the water, but at the difference in the temperature compared to yesterday. There was a distinct chill in the air that set her teeth chattering, and made her glad of the cardigan she had flung around her slim frame.

Eleanor's entrance went unnoticed by the butler and a maid who were standing at either side of Irene and, with one hand under the armpit and the other under a leg, were attempting to drag her from the pool.

"Do you need a hand?" Eleanor hastened towards their position — the steps on the left hand side of the pool.

Cripps looked up. "It's the weight of the water, my lady, but we're nearly there. Be careful, Edna." He put out a hand as the girl started to pitch forward. "We don't want you in there again. You've already had one ducking."

"I couldn't help it, Mr Cripps, sir. The mat is missing and the steps is ever so slippery."

He would have done better to have waded into the pool, lifted his mistress into his arms, and carried her out. Perhaps he didn't want to get wetter than he was already. The bottom of his trousers were dark where the water had seeped into them.

"Did you find her face down like that?"

"I didn't, my lady. That was poor Edna. She came and fetched me."

"Oh no! Mother! How could this have happened?" Diana raced through the doors. She came to a halt beside Eleanor. "Are you sure she's dead?"

The battling servants at last managed to get Mrs Cuthbert clear of the water, though her body now slanted down the steps.

"Quite sure, Miss Diana." Cripps shook his head. He took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and dried his hands.

Eleanor knelt and dipped a hand into the water. It was icy to the touch as was the back of Mrs Cuthbert's leg when she placed a finger there.

"I've sent Abigail for Doctor Bernstein."

"There won't be much he can do, Miss Diana, except to help move her."

Diana knelt beside her mother, putting a hand towards her shoulder as if to turn her over.

"Don't try and move her, Diana," Eleanor said. "You should call the police." She got to her feet and stepped back, out of the way.

At that moment, the rest of Irene's children joined them. Persephone let out a cry and ran to kneel beside her sister and her mother's body.

"What nonsense is this? Why should we call the police?" Raphael's voice rang out loud and angry in the echoing space. It set off the maid who, shocked, wet, and exhausted by her efforts, began to cry.

"Stop that noise. Go back to the scullery if all you can do is snivel."

"Get a grip on that temper of yours, Raphael. It's not the poor girl's fault."

"Isn't it? Haven't you felt the temperature in here? Mother probably had a heart attack caused by the shock of the freezing cold water, and it's the maid's job to keep the fire going."

"What was mother doing down here, anyway?" Persephone demanded. "Did anyone hear her come down?"

There was a general shaking of heads and murmurs in the negative.

Eleanor leant back against a pillar and took everything in, from the body on the floor in its sodden satin pyjamas, to the bickering siblings, the sobbing maid and the now silent and strangely immobile Cripps. She had expected him to take the matter in hand and, well, do something. Instead, he appeared to be waiting for instructions, unsure by himself of how best to proceed.

All four Cuthberts were still in nightclothes and dressing gowns. With the exception of Diana, who must have combed her hair before coming down, the rest looked tousled. Raphael in particular looked bleary-eyed, although his bilious yellow and green-checked gown looked warm. Eleanor, who hated having her sleep cut short, sympathised with him if that were the reason for his grumpiness.

Eugenie looked the brightest of them all. Thus far she had said nothing, merely shaking her head from time to time, as though not quite believing the evidence of her own eyes, unable to take in the tragedy that had befallen them. Now, with a glance at the butler, she went to put an arm around the dripping Edna, brushing wet hair off the maid's face. Eleanor heard her murmur something before she led the tearful girl away and they disappeared through a small side door.

"Good heavens! What has happened here?" At last, Doctor Bernstein arrived, clad in pyjamas and a checked dressing gown. He bustled up to where Irene lay, dropped to his haunches and put a hand to the side of her neck. "Tschah! She is dead. Poor, poor Irene."

Eleanor's eyebrows rose. He might at least have told them something they didn't know. Like how she had died for a start. It might look

like a simple drowning on the face of it, but Eleanor was yet to be convinced.

Beginning to feel that she was watching an artfully staged tableau, or even a French farce, she stood away from the pillar.

"I still think you should call the police, Diana."

"The police?" Bernstein frowned and looked again at the body. "Ah, I see." He moved a strand of Irene's wet hair, revealing the bruise that Eleanor had spotted earlier when Cripps and Edna had been struggling to pull the body out of the water. "Yes, yes. Certainly the police should be called."

"What? Are you both crazy?" Raphael threw out a hand towards his mother. "It's clear that she drowned." He took a step towards the doctor.

"Wait, Raphael." Diana restrained him. "Eleanor, please. I don't understand."

Eleanor bit back a sigh. She was a guest, and a possible client, at the Cuthbert clinic. It wasn't up to her to take control and tell her hosts what to do, yet if she didn't a murderer might go unpunished. Irene's death was suspicious, and most likely due to foul play. It should be investigated

"I'm sorry, Diana. I think your mother was murdered. I suggest that we leave her here and lock up the pool while the police are called and everyone that needs to gets dressed. It might also be an idea to have breakfast or at least some hot coffee. Raphael is right, it is very cold in here, and you're all standing around in your nightclothes."

"Do you agree, Doctor?"

"I am afraid so. You would be wise to take the advice of your friend."

As if a spell had been broken, Diana shivered but took control.

"Yes, all right. Come on, everyone. There's nothing we can do here. Cripps, will you lock the service door on your way out, please? I'll lock up this side."

Raphael, in an unexpected display of tenderness, helped Persephone to her feet from where she still crouched next to her mother. He hugged her close.

"Come on, old girl. Diana's right. There's nothing we can do for her now."

They moved off in a group and had almost reached the doors when they swung open and a sandy-haired young man came in.

"Oh, this is where you've all got to. Is Mrs Cuthbert with you?"

Persephone whimpered and the newcomer peered around them. "Good Lord! Is she dead? Don't tell me you've killed her!"



Chapter 5



Eleanor cast a glance at Raphael, but all the fight and bluster seemed to have gone out of him. He still had an arm around his younger sister's shoulder. She had collapsed against him and instead of saying anything to the newcomer, he looked over his shoulder at Bernstein.

"Can you give her something, Doctor? This has really hit her hard."

"It is shock, I suspect. She needs to go back to bed with a hot drink. I have a mild sedative I can give her. I will also see if the maid needs one. She, too, needs to keep warm after her dip in the icy water."

Eleanor listened and took in the words, but her attention was firmly on the newcomer. It was left to Diana to speak sharply to the sandy-haired man.

"Don't be ridiculous, Aubrey. As you can see, my mother is dead, so I suggest you go back to the office and wait there until the police arrive. I'm sure you've got plenty to do."

"The police?"

"You heard her."

Raphael glowered at him as Diana chivvied them all into the painted passage and locked the doors to the pool.

"Go and get dressed while I phone the police," she said when they reached the hall. "Persephone, you'd better go back to bed as the doctor suggests. I'll make sure a hot drink is brought up to you. Eleanor, will you come with me, please?"

"Yes, of course."

Eleanor slipped her arm through her friend's, lending her moral support. With one exception, Irene's death had been a shock to all of them. Diana had borne up well, but was nearing the end of her tether.

Inside the drawing room, Diana closed the door firmly behind her and walked to the telephone. She did not immediately pick up the receiver.

"Are you absolutely sure that it's murder? You said a bruise, but could mother not have got that against the steps? It might have been enough to knock her out, and so she drowned."

She sank into a chair, and Eleanor perched beside her on the arm.

"Perfectly sure. I wouldn't joke or mislead you. It can't have been an accident, or suicide, so her death can only be murder."

She didn't point out that it is hard to knock yourself out with a blow to the back of the head, if you are then found face down in the water.

Diana sighed. "I'm just clutching at straws, aren't I?" She picked up the instrument and made the call.

"They said they'd send someone over straight away, and not to touch anything until they get here."

"Well, you locked up the pool, so that takes care of that. Who was that young man that joined us?"

"Aubrey Vernon, mother's secretary. Look, I'd better go up and put some clothes on before the police arrive, but I wanted to ask you if you would stay. From what Ann told me when we met, you've had a lot of experience at investigating crimes, certainly more than any of us, and I'd feel happier with you on hand to advise me."

Eleanor thought a lawyer would be of more use than a private enquiry agent, and wondered if Diana had realised the obvious. Did she cling to some idea that her mother had been murdered by a stranger, by someone from outside the house?

"I'll have to stay to begin with. The police will want to interview everyone who was here at the time."

"Yes, but afterwards? I'm not convinced our local police will be up to the job of catching the killer, but you might."

"Gracious, Diana, you have a dim view of the constabulary, and a very rosy one of my own abilities. Besides, it would mean me asking a lot of uncomfortable questions of you, your family, and your staff. Are you sure that's what you want?"

Diana put her head in her hands. "Yes," she said after a moment. "I suppose, as the eldest, I'm now head of the family. I can foresee us being at loggerheads soon, and I'm going to need your support, and Ann's, especially if the house is swarming with police officers. Please say you'll stay — if only for another day or two."

Faced with such a plea, Eleanor found it difficult to refuse. She thought hard for a moment or two.

"Yes, all right, though I can't speak for Ann, and I'm going to need my maid if I'm staying. I hope you don't mind if I phone her from here and ask her to come?"

"Of course not. Thank you, Eleanor."

With that settled, Diana got up from the chair, gave her friend's arm a squeeze and went to dress. Eleanor heard her talking to Cripps in the hall, letting him know that the police were coming and to let them in when they arrived.

"Very well, Miss Diana. Breakfast won't be long, and I've put a pot of coffee on the dining room hotplate already."

The voices faded as the speakers moved away. For a second, Eleanor debated whether to grab a cup of coffee before telephoning, then stayed where she was and made the call to her apartment in Bellevue Mansions, Piccadilly.

"Is that you, Matilda?"

There was a pause, no longer than a heartbeat, before the maid's familiar response.

"This is Matilda speaking."

Eleanor smiled to herself. Towards the end of the war, both she and her maid, Tilly Walton, had briefly worked for a military intelligence unit and although she had refused to have anything to do with them since — despite the head of the unit's attempts to lure her back into the murky world of espionage — some of the things they had learned still had value. Passwords, for instance.

Calling Tilly by her full name was enough to alert her and make her pay close attention to her mistress's words. It was a useful ploy if something was wrong. The fact that she had answered in the same manner meant that she understood.

"I'm going to be staying on a few days at the clinic, Ann too, possibly. There has been a dreadful tragedy. Will you pack some dark coloured clothes for me, and also bring the flowered suit that I wore last year in the south of France, please?"

"On the Cote d'Azur, my lady?"

It was a bathing suit. Unaware of the presence of the pool, Eleanor had not thought to bring one with her, but if she needed to take a closer look at the place where Irene had died, it might come in handy.

"Yes, that's the one. Take a taxi and get here as soon as you can."

"Very well, my lady. Is there anything else you'd like me to pack?"

Eleanor pondered the seemingly innocuous question and decided that, if there were a killer on the loose, it wouldn't do any harm to have a pistol with her.

"No doubt there are rolling pins aplenty in the kitchen, but you could bring one for me." Tilly would understand the reference. The maid had a habit of using items of kitchen equipment — rolling pins, potato peelers, but so far not knives — as offensive weapons. Eleanor had a small enamel-handled pistol and was a crack shot.

"Just as you wish, my lady. I should be there within the hour."

Happy now that she had reinforcement on the way, Eleanor ended the call and went in search of coffee in the dining room. She found a

full pot and poured herself a cup. It was perhaps not the done thing to help oneself when a guest in someone else's house, but one should never have to face a murder without so much as coffee inside you. She gulped it down, grateful for the hot drink as much as the caffeine. Feeling better, she walked upstairs to find Ann and tell her the news.

"Please tell me you are joking, Eleanor, darling," Ann, fully dressed and sitting at the dressing table, shook her dark head. "Although, I'm not that surprised, quite frankly. When did it happen?"

"I'm not sure." Eleanor tapped a forefinger against her chin. "You remember how warm it felt by the pool yesterday? Well, the water was icy cold this morning"

"You don't mean she froze to death?"

"No, someone smacked her on the back of the neck, either knocking her out and leaving her to drown, or stunning her and holding her down until she did."

"Ugh. Don't. That's not a nice thought first thing in the morning."

Eleanor refrained from pointing out that it was now past nine o'clock and hardly first thing. Ann had always been a late riser.

"Either way," she said, "the temperature of the water might give a false impression of the time of death. Given that Irene was in her night clothes, my guess is that it happened several hours ago."

"Any idea who might have done it?"

"None whatsoever. The police have been called and are on their way, and Diana has asked that we stay on for a day or so, as a form of moral support, I suppose. I've agreed, but don't feel you have to, and I've sent for Tilly."

"Well, then, of course I shall stay. I've no work on at present, and I'm not going to pass up on the chance of seeing you do some real sleuthing." Ann grinned and rubbed her palms together.

"Not so fast, old thing. Diana hasn't asked me to investigate, although she doesn't sound to have any confidence in the local police, so I'm staying well out of this one."

"Spoilsport." Ann wrinkled her nose. "Still, if I know you, you won't be able to help yourself."

"Well, maybe you're right. Just stay on your toes and keep your eyes and ears open. This isn't a game, Ann. There's a murderer in the house and, while I don't think he is likely to strike again, if you start asking awkward questions, he might."

"He?" Ann leaned towards her friend.

"Or she."

"Perhaps they were all in it together, all the Cuthbert children. Or perhaps it was the doctor."

"Whoever it was, I need my breakfast. Are you ready?" Eleanor threw a glance at Ann, who was busy applying a little rouge to her cheeks. And why not? It was doubtful there would be any beauty treatments on offer that day.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Good, come on."

Eleanor led the way downstairs. By the time they reached the half landing where the bust of Nefertiti gazed sightlessly down into the hall, the sound of raised voices reached them from the dining room.

Irene might have been the name for the Greek goddess of peace, but Irene Cuthbert had fomented discord within her own household. Had she now paid the price for that?



Chapter 6



The hubbub in the dining room died away as the friends entered. Mumbled greetings answered Ann's 'Good morning', and Diana pointed to the sideboard loaded with dishes and told them to help themselves.

Cripps and the maid called Abigail circled the table pouring out coffee. Persephone's chair was empty.

"The police are here and at the pool," Diana told her friends. "An Inspector Logan is in charge. He said he would join us shortly."

The arguments between her siblings began again as Eleanor and Ann made their selection from bacon, sausage, scrambled or boiled eggs, fried bread, and grilled tomatoes. Toast and warmed rolls sat in warming cloths to one side.

Despite the horror of the morning, Eleanor felt ravenous, but only took two of the boiled eggs and the same number of slices of toast. She threw a glance over her shoulder, looking for butter and marmalade on the table, and caught the doctor smiling and nodding at her. Wondering why, she sat at the table, in the same place she'd occupied the night before, and kept her gaze on her plate.

"Well, I still say that it has to be someone from outside." Raphael glared around the table as if daring anyone to contradict him. "Mother must have heard the intruder and come downstairs."

"But everywhere was locked up," Diana said.

"We've been over this." Doctor Bernstein wagged a fork at the scowling Raphael. "Let us at least wait and see what the police have to tell us."

"They may not tell you anything. On the contrary," Ann said, "they'll expect you to do the telling."

"Oh? You have some experience of this sort of thing, do you?" Eugenie's question was uttered with a sneer.

"Yes, I...uh." Ann stopped as Eleanor kicked her foot. "I'm so sorry to hear of your mother's death, but I have met Chief Inspector Blount of Scotland Yard. I gave a party last New Year's Eve, at which one of the guests was murdered."

Diana groaned and put her head in her hands. "Oh gods, this is awful."

Eleanor put a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Don't despair. Your mother would not have wanted that."

Diana lifted her head. "No, you're right, thank you."

"What are you going to do about the clinic?" Ann addressed the question to Diana, but threw a glance at Doctor Bernstein. "Will you keep it open and carry on with the business?"

"That depends on Mother's will," Diana replied.

"Don't you know what provisions she made?" asked Raphael.

"How could she?" Eugenie signalled to Cripps for more coffee. "Mother changed it every five minutes, depending on which of us was her favourite at the time."

"Oh, Lor', then Persephone will cop the lot."

"I wonder if she's all right. I suppose I'd better go and check on her." Diana pushed back her chair.

"It's all right. I'm here. I couldn't stay up there on my own any longer." Persephone entered with red-rimmed eyes and tear stained cheeks. "What were you all talking about?"

"Don't worry, dear. Come and get yourself some breakfast. The police are down at the pool and will be here shortly. You need something inside you before then."

"Here, sit down, Seph." Raphael got to his feet and pulled out his sister's chair. "I'll get you some toast. Would you like bacon and egg?"

"Thank you, just the toast."

Persephone took her seat, and Eugenie passed butter and marmalade towards her. "Are you feeling warmer? I'm glad to see you've got a warm skirt and pullover on."

Eleanor sipped at her coffee, quietly observing the goings-on across the table. The three older Cuthberts showed a touching level of concern for their younger sister. Did they always? Persephone appeared to have been closer to her mother, more affected by her death than the others, but had Irene really had a favourite?

Large families were something of a mystery to Eleanor, who had but an older brother she got on well with. Most families pulled together during a crisis and she assumed the Cuthberts were no different, yet families had their breaking points, too. For Diana's sake, she hoped Irene's murder would bring them closer — it might just as easily tear them apart.

"Is everybody here?"

The loud voice behind her made Eleanor jump. She glanced over a shoulder where a uniformed police sergeant stood in the doorway, as if guarding their exit. It was his companion who had spoken, and he now walked behind her and Diana to take up a position leaning over Irene's vacant chair.

"Yes, Inspector, we are," Diana said, sitting up straighter in her chair.

Everyone had finished eating by now except for Persephone, who threw her half nibbled piece of toast onto her plate and pushed it away from her in disgust.

"Right. I'm Detective Inspector Logan and, as you're no doubt aware, this is a murder enquiry. Were you all in the house at the time the crime was committed?"

"When was it committed, Inspector?" asked Eleanor.

Only the man's head, shoulders and upper chest appeared above the high-backed chair, his build was so short and squat. Perhaps to make up for being barely of regulation height his thin lips beneath a pencil moustache were twisted into a permanent sneer.

"We are still trying to ascertain that. The doctor is down there now, Miss...?"

"Lady Eleanor Bakewell. I'm a guest of Diana's and have been here since mid-morning yesterday."

"Yes, Inspector," Diana said. "As has Lady Ann Carstairs, sitting next to Lady Eleanor. The rest are family, and Doctor Bernstein who lives and works here. We have all been on the premises since mother retired to bed last night."

"And when was that?"

"A little after nine."

"That seems a little early."

Diana shook her head. "Not at all. It was the norm. Mother believed in early to bed and early to rise."

The Inspector nodded and turned his attention to the three on the opposite side of the table, starting off by asking their names. They replied readily enough, if a little sullenly.

"It's the servants you need to speak to, not us," Raphael said. "Why would we harm our own mother?"

"Why would they, Mr Cuthbert? Had she sacked anyone recently, or had a disagreement with any of them?"

"Certainly not." Eugenie cast her brother a dark look. "It must have been someone from outside. A burglar most likely."

The policeman shook his head. "Yet, as far as we've been able to ascertain, Miss, no one broke in, and the staff say that the house was all locked up this morning as usual."

"So you are speaking to them, then?"

"Of course we are, Mr Cuthbert. We do know our job. There's a constable with them now. So, what did you all do last night after Mrs Cuthbert had retired?"

"I also retired about the same time, Inspector." Doctor Bernstein glowered at Logan from the far end of the table. "I slept in the bedroom attached to my laboratory."

"Oh? You are Doctor Bernstein, I take it."

"Yes, I am."

"And where might your laboratory be then, sir?"

"It's actually over the kitchen, though the access is via a staircase at the end of the corridor on the opposite side of the house."

"Thank you." Logan directed his gaze at Eleanor. "What about you, my lady? Did you also retire at the same time?"

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "Certainly not. We had dinner at seven, then everyone went into the drawing room. After Mrs Cuthbert and Doctor Bernstein retired, the rest of us chatted for the most part and listened to some records on the gramophone. I went to bed around eleven o'clock."

"Did you hear anything during the night?"

"No, I didn't."

"Did anyone else?" Logan's glance swept around the table, to be met with the shake of heads. "What? You all slept soundly in your beds?"

He sounded disbelieving. Eleanor thought this unfair; she had found no creaking stairs or floorboards and both her and Ann's bedroom doors opened smoothly and silently, and so, presumably, did all the rest. Why should their slumbers have been disturbed?

The question he ought to be asking was why, and when, had Mrs Cuthbert gone downstairs? And if the rest of the occupants had slept so soundly, why hadn't she? Perhaps she was a light sleeper. Eleanor made a mental note to ask Diana when they were alone.

Logan started to strut around the table in a manner reminiscent of one of Eleanor's father's turkey cocks. She suppressed an unladylike smirk at the thought and tried to pay attention.

One by one, Inspector Logan asked everyone at the table the same few questions. No one admitted hearing anything in the night, or seeing Mrs Cuthbert between the time she went up to bed and the time she'd been found. All said they were asleep, and no one could offer a motive for her untimely death.

"All right, I shall want to interview you all individually later, but for the moment I'd like to know what happened first thing this morning. How did you hear of Mrs Cuthbert's death?"

When the Cuthberts all started answering at once, he held up a hand.

"One at a time, please, if you don't mind."

"Then I'll go first," Diana said, "as I was the first one to hear about it. A maid, Abigail Wright, came and woke me, told me that my mother had drowned in the pool. She was crying, and said that mother was dead. I told her to go and let Doctor Bernstein know. I closed the door, threw on a robe, and went to wake my brother and sisters."

Logan looked across the table and asked if any of her siblings could confirm this, but it was Eleanor who replied.

"I can, Inspector. I was up and already dressed when I heard footsteps running along the corridor outside my door. I poked my head out to see what was going on and saw a maid knocking on a door. I heard what the maid said, and went downstairs myself to see if I could help. Diana joined me not long after."

"What time was this?"

"About seven o'clock, or thereabouts."

"Very well, thank you. Now, if you'd like to give your names, and addresses where appropriate, to Sergeant Harris here, then I'll speak to you one at a time, starting with Miss Diana. Is there somewhere private we could go?"

"Yes, there's a small study beyond the office. We can use that."


The sergeant came forward as Diana and his superior left the dining room. Eleanor and Ann gave their names and addresses then went out into the hall.

"What are we going to do now?" Ann whispered.


Eleanor lifted her shoulders and let them fall. "The only thing we can do — watch and listen. I need to know everything I can glean about this household and their relationship with the dead woman. I think, though, that we should have a few words with the secretary."

Ann grinned. "I knew you couldn't resist. You'll have this cracked in no time."

Eleanor sighed and wished she felt as confident as Ann. There was a long way to go before a murderer was uncovered. Was she up to the task?



Chapter 7



Eleanor tapped smartly on the office door then pushed it open and led the way inside without waiting for a reply.

The secretary sat with his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands.

"Hello, Mr Vernon. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Questions?" he mumbled and looked up. "What sort of questions?"

His glance travelled between them. Ann moved forward and put out a hand. "Hello. I'm Lady Ann Carstairs. We haven't met, but I'm staying here, together with Lady Eleanor, at the request of Diana, who's an old friend of ours. We came to enjoy the clinic's residential treatments, but as that's no longer possible —"

"Why not?"

Ann threw a glance at Eleanor. "Well, Mrs Cuthbert's death has rather thrown that idea up in the air, don't you think?"

Eleanor gave him a hard stare and wondered if he, too, were in shock. "The police are all over the house. Diana has enough to occupy her without worrying about beauty treatments."

"Then why are you still here?" Vernon frowned and shook his head, and Eleanor realised it wasn't rudeness on his part, but a genuine enquiry.

"Because Lady Eleanor is a private detective, and Diana has asked her to look into Mrs Cuthbert's murder."

"Really?" His eyes widened. "I've never heard of a lady detective before."

"Well you have now and, even better, you've met one." Ann perched on the edge of the desk. "Eleanor here has even helped Scotland Yard with a few cases. Detective Chief Inspector Blount speaks very highly of her, let me tell you."

"Gosh! Blount of the Yard, eh?"

Vernon sounded suitably impressed. Eleanor laughed and waved a hand at her friend.

"I'm afraid Lady Ann exaggerates, although I have met the Chief Inspector on a few occasions when I've been engaged on a case."

As if this was enough to satisfy him of Eleanor's credentials, he nodded and said, "So what questions did you want to ask me?"

"Thank you, Mr Vernon. I noticed that you weren't at breakfast and wondered if the police had spoken to you, yet."

"Yes. I was talking to Diana in the hall when they arrived."

"And? What did they say?"

Vernon ran a hand over his sandy hair and stared into space, as if the conversation between the police and himself were written on the ether. "Yes, I remember. The Inspector — I think he said his name was Logan — asked what I knew about this business. I said nothing because I'd only recently arrived and went looking for Mrs Cuthbert as she wasn't in the office."

"Was that unusual?"

"Oh, yes. She was always there on the stroke of eight."

"I see. Go on."

"Well, Inspector Logan asked Diana if that was right, and she said yes, so he said they didn't need to speak to me at the moment, but may do so later."

If the Inspector was to do his job properly then, in Eleanor's estimation, there was no 'may' about it. Perhaps the young man had misunderstood.

"Don't you normally have breakfast with the Cuthberts?" Ann asked.

"No, I have it at home before I come to work."

"Where is home?"

"I rent a small house in Dulwich village. It's not far from here, on the other side of the park."

Belatedly, Eleanor sat down in the only other chair. She supposed she must be sitting in Mrs Cuthbert's place, but didn't let that bother her. The police would want to speak to the secretary before too long. There was every chance that he had vital information with regard to the family, the staff, and their possible motives. With luck, she might steal a march on Logan and his men.

With that enticing prospect in mind, she smiled at Vernon and started her investigation proper.

"Did you enjoy working for Mrs Cuthbert?"

He shrugged. "It was a job, though I have to be honest and say that she was a hard taskmaster."

"What is it you do, Mr Vernon?"

"Please." He gave a shy smile, that emphasised his youth. "Call me Aubrey."

"Aubrey," Ann said. "That's a nice name."

Eleanor hid a smile at her friend's attempt to put the young man at his ease. He was clearly on edge, but whether that was because he was unused to having an attractive lady sitting on his desk, or if he had something to hide was too early to tell. She pressed on.

"What does your job entail, Aubrey?"

"I'm responsible for dealing with our overseas suppliers, in particular the cosmetics company we buy from in Chicago. I also type Mrs Cuthbert's letters to clients and customers. The clinic has occasional promotions and I would send out details and pamphlets. All the general office stuff, really. That's what I do."

"What about appointments?"

The secretary pointed to a telephone on the corner of the desk. "Mrs Cuthbert always dealt with those. Clients like to hear a female voice when they call." He grinned. "Most women don't want their husbands to know they are having beauty treatments. According to Mrs Cuthbert, clients wanted their menfolk to think that they were naturally beautiful. It's feminine logic, or so she said."

Eleanor did not believe logic varied to any great extent between the sexes, but let that pass.

"Is that telephone the same number as the rest of the house?"

"No. Only this number is given out to customers. When they call for an appointment, it gets put into this diary."

He shifted the papers on the desk, lifting up a pile to show a large leather-bound book which he pulled out and placed on top. He explained that the decision as to which of the Cuthbert girls a client was placed with was down to Mrs Cuthbert in the first instance. Once they had been matched, as it were, the client would always see the same girl.

"Is it a happy household, do you think?"

Vernon's face, which had been animated as he explained the booking system, suddenly became guarded. "Really, Lady Eleanor, I wouldn't like to say."

"Then perhaps I should point out to you that the police will soon be asking you these very same questions, and will likely keep on at you until you do like to say. Think of this interview as a trial run."

He considered that for a moment, his light blue eyes pensive behind his pale lashes. "Hmm. Well, in that case I would have to say, no."

"I'm not surprised," Ann said. "I only met Mrs Cuthbert once, at dinner last night, and frankly, Aubrey" — she leaned a shoulder towards him, as if sharing a confidence — "I thought she was a right Tartar. I'll bet there were arguments."

"Sometimes." He nodded. "I sometimes thought she was as demanding as a mother as she was as an employer. Neither I, nor they,

nor even Doctor Bernstein, seemed to please her. I wondered at times whether she suffered from some ailment. She was always so irritable."

"Even with the clients?"

"Oh, no. Then she would be sweetness and light, with flattering words and a face wreathed in smiles."

His disgust at such mercurial, not to say hypocritical, behaviour was evident. Eleanor thought him an astute observer.

"Earlier, when you entered the pool room, what did you mean when you said they'd killed her?"

Vernon blushed and squirmed in his chair. "I shouldn't have said that. I spoke out of turn."

"You must have meant it, though, so what was your reason for saying it? Did you have anyone particular in mind?"

"Well..." He grimaced. "I have to admit that my first thought when I saw Mrs Cuthbert splayed out on the steps like that was that Raphael had killed her."

Ann opened her mouth to say something, but Eleanor held up a hand and shook her head. "Why Raphael? I thought he was her favourite?"

It had only been an impression, gained despite the harsh words that Irene had spoken to her son before dinner the previous evening, and Eleanor was keen to hear if Vernon thought the same.

"No," he said. "If she had a favourite at all, I would have said that was Persephone. The other three often argued with her. I once heard Diana talking to Eugenie and saying that she wanted to live her own life, not the one her mother chose for her."

Eleanor and Ann exchanged a glance. Diana had said nothing to either of them about being dissatisfied with her lot, not even when talking of Raphael, and his desire to be an artist. Was the secretary mistaken, or had Diana deliberately misled them? And, if so, why?

"And Raphael's reason for wanting to murder his mother?" asked Eleanor. She spoke harshly hoping to provoke a reaction with her blunt words.

It worked, for the pale young man went even paler. He put up a hand to his weak chin and stared forlornly at his visitors.

"Murder." He shook his head. "It hasn't sunk in yet, I'm afraid. It's hard to think that I will never see Mrs Cuthbert again, let alone that she was killed in that awful manner."

"Yet you thought Raphael capable of it. Why?"

"Only because I knew that he hated working for a health and beauty business, and he blamed his mother for that. He wanted to be an artist. You must have seen his work, he has real talent and could have had work on display in the National Gallery, but instead his mother had him designing adverts for newspapers."

Ann threw a glance at Eleanor. "Didn't she say something yesterday about an advertising agent?"

"Oh, we use one of those." Vernon rushed to agree with her. "But it's Raphael that supplies the artwork. He always used to say it was a misuse of his art, and that it should be put towards a greater good."

Eleanor's eyebrows rose. It seemed a pretentious attitude, but she had not sensed that about him on their short acquaintance. "Have you any idea what he meant by that?"

"You'd have to ask him, but whenever I spoke to him — which I'll admit wasn't often, I've never had a lot to do with the family, only Mrs C. — I got the impression that he considered working at the clinic was beneath him. That it wasn't a fit occupation for a man to have."

"But was it lucrative? How many clients does the clinic have?"

He pushed his chair back and opened a drawer of the desk to take out a couple of hand-written sheets.

"I've got a list," he said like a character in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. He ran a finger down the pages. "There are around thirty to forty customers who regularly visit at least once a month, and several

more who come in from time to time. So, I suppose that's lucrative. It must be profitable, otherwise how would they pay my wages?"

On the point of asking him how much that wage was, Eleanor stopped herself. It was not the done thing to ask a gentleman his income, not unless one was a Regency mama, trying to ascertain if said gentleman was a good prospect for her daughter. If knowing Vernon's salary became relevant to the investigation, she could always ask Diana.

"I didn't realise this place was so popular," Ann said.

"Yes, business has been steadily growing and Diana had plans, as you know, to take it up a notch with people staying. I hope she still wants a secretary now that Mrs Cuthbert has died." His brow creased in worry.

"Oh, I should think so, Aubrey." Ann gave his hand a reassuring pat. "I don't think Diana, or her sisters, will want the business to close, and how would they manage without you?"

"Can we get back to Raphael for a moment? Was he just responsible for the advertising?"

"No. Mrs Cuthbert insisted that he dealt with the company accounts and submitted them to their accountant."

"Who was that?"

"Donald and Dickerson. They have offices on the High Street here. I think Raphael is quite good with figures, though I doubt he enjoyed doing the accounts. However, he once told me that saying he was going to see the accountant was often a handy excuse to get out of the house and take his sketchbook to the local park."

He smiled at the memory, but Eleanor's opinion of Mrs Cuthbert's only son was not improved on hearing that he played truant on occasion.

"What about the servants? Was Mrs Cuthbert as demanding of them as everyone else? Could one of them have killed her?"

He screwed up his face, but then shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't have much to do with them, but I can't see them going to

those lengths. If they were unhappy, they could always give their notice. There'd be no need to resort to murder."

He had a point. Eleanor parked the question of the servants to one side to come back to later.

"As a matter of interest, could Mrs Cuthbert swim?"

His eyes widened yet again. "I'm sorry, I haven't the slightest idea."

Unable to think of anything else to ask the secretary, Eleanor got to her feet.

Seeing her friend ready to go, Ann hopped off the table, straightened her dress and flashed Vernon a dazzling smile. "Nice meeting you, Aubrey."

He pushed himself upright and gave a small bow. "Likewise, I'm sure your ladyship."


"By the way..." Eleanor turned in the doorway. "How did you get in the house? Everyone was down at the pool, so who let you in?"

"I did. I have my own key to the side door." He waved an airy hand in a direction over his shoulder.


"Where is that?"

"It's tucked out of sight of the front, round the corner at the end of the corridor where the treatment rooms are."

Delighted to have a solid fact to check on, Eleanor thanked him and dragged Ann with her into the hall.



Chapter 8



“Hey, what’s the rush?” Ann retrieved her arm from Eleanor’s grasp and gave it a rub. “Where are we going?”

“Sorry, old girl, I wanted to check that side door while there’s no one around. Well, no policemen, anyway.”

“How do you know that corridor, or the treatment rooms, aren’t swarming with constables?”

“It’s a risk we’ll have to take. Besides, if there are, I’ll rely on you to distract them. Come on.”

Ann laughed, aware that her good looks and vivacious manner made her an attractive diversion. Unfortunately, she had no opportunity to distract anyone, for the passage was empty, as too were the treatment rooms whose doors all stood wide open.

Eleanor gave them no more than a brief glance as she hurried past.

“I wonder,” Ann said, “what I can do while you’re sleuthing. I feel I ought to do something, but also surplus to requirements. Do you think they would consider giving me a manicure? The family probably want to keep occupied, too, and apart from Persephone none of them look prostrate with grief.”

Eleanor had to agree, but just because someone wasn’t wailing or rending their clothes didn’t mean they weren’t mourning their mother’s passing.

“They might. You can always ask.”

“Is there anything I could do to help you?”

Eleanor considered the offer for a moment before shaking her head. "No, just stay alert and report on anything you see or hear that's interesting or relevant. I don't want any harm coming to you."

They had reached the end of the corridor by this time and Eleanor put out a hand to the door at the end. It was a single wooden door with a top light and a Yale lock.

"So, this is the way that Aubrey comes and goes," Ann said.

Eleanor turned around and leaned against it, arms crossed over her chest. "And anyone else. He can't have the only key to the door, and it's the sort that can be put on a latch and left unlocked until the knob is pressed down."

"And that means?"

"That Aubrey might have come in even earlier than his first appearance this morning, murdered Mrs Cuthbert, and gone away again. Or, he might have left the door on the latch when he went home yesterday, allowing someone else to come in."

"No, that won't work." Ann ran a finger below her lower lip. "Cripps said he checked the doors last night. Presumably, that included this one."

"Hmm, yes. If he was telling the truth."

"What a suspicious mind you have, darling."

Eleanor grinned. "I find it helps in this job. Right, you scoot off and find one of the sisters — they're probably in the drawing room if they're not with Inspector Logan. I'm going to check this key business with Vernon."

They parted in the hall and Eleanor did as she'd said, but the result was disappointing: there were two other keys besides the secretary's own. One hung on the master key board in the kitchen, the other was kept by Mrs Cuthbert in her desk. It lay inside the drawer, and Vernon took his key from his pocket to prove they were the same.

She thanked him and left him in peace and almost ran into the butler as she stepped into the hall. Had he been listening at the door?

"Excuse me, my lady." Cripps dipped his head towards Eleanor. "Your maid has arrived and I've shown her up to your room. Shall I make the necessary arrangements for her to eat and sleep with the rest of the servants? Assuming you are going to be staying for a while, that is."

Eleanor gazed at him coolly, aware that he was fishing for information. In this instance, however, she felt he had a right to know, and antagonising him was not a good idea.

"Yes, if you would, please. We shall be here as long as Diana needs us. I hope we won't discommode you too much."

"Not at all, my lady. Always a pleasure to have Miss Diana's friends staying with us." He bowed, though his smile seemed a little forced.

As anxious as she was to see Tilly, Eleanor strolled past him and up the stairs at a sedate pace. When she reached her room, the maid was busy unpacking the extra clothes she had brought and hanging them up in the wardrobe.

"Hello, my dear." Eleanor sank onto the stool in front of the dressing table and looked up at her oldest and best friend. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you."

Tilly turned from shaking out a fringed dress in midnight blue. "So, what's been happening, then? Got yourself another case, have you?" She slipped the garment onto a hanger.

Only a month in age separated mistress and maid. They had grown up together on the Duke of Bakewell's country seat, Rowsley Park, running through the woods, paddling in streams, watching the lambs being born on the home farm—whatever they did, good or bad, they did together. When they were older Eleanor insisted they be schooled together and later still, when the duchess took it upon herself to teach her daughter deportment, mistress and maid had walked the long corridors of the house with books on their heads, and caught them when they fell because they'd been giggling so much.

Tilly was the daughter of the duke's cook, but Eleanor refused to be parted from her, reckoning that it was only a trick of fate that had given herself a title and (thanks to a wealthy aunt) a fortune. It could so easily have been the other way around.

For her part, Tilly was devoted to her mistress. As well as being personal maid, cook, and housekeeper, she saw herself as Eleanor's protector, and was never afraid to speak out if she thought Eleanor foolhardy or unwise. She would guard her mistress's life, but not her own tongue if by using one she could save the other.

"Yes, as you probably gathered from my phone call, there have been dark deeds afoot here at Cuthbert House. Diana's mother, Irene, was murdered sometime this morning. I don't know precisely when, and I suspect the police don't either."

"Lumme, my lady. I thought you and Lady Ann had come here for a bit of pampering and a relaxing few days. That don't sound relaxing to me."

Tilly continued the unpacking while Eleanor quickly brought her up to date with events since her own arrival at the clinic, including her tour of the house and Irene's odd behaviour at the previous evening's dinner.

"Well, Miss Diana may be your friend, my lady, but I have to say that the family sounds a bit of a rum lot."

On the previous evening, Eleanor would probably have agreed with Tilly's assessment, but now that she'd had the chance to observe them more closely, she found Diana and her siblings intriguing.

"Oh, I don't know, Tilly. If you lift the lid on most families, you'll find all sorts of tensions and disagreements running underneath. I don't suppose the Cuthberts are that far from normal."

"So, Lady Ann told Miss Diana that you were now a private enquiry agent, and she's asked you to stay and investigate has she?"

"Something like that, yes. Frankly, to have left immediately would have seemed like running away, and leaving her in the lurch. I may not have seen Diana for a long time, but she's still my friend."

Tilly nodded to herself. Her mistress would never let down anyone, still less a friend.

"What would you like me to do, your ladyship? I take it you haven't brought me all the way out here just to look after your dresses."

Dulwich wasn't that far from central London, but Tilly was right in thinking Eleanor had an ulterior motive for asking her maid to join her.

"Well, I've got off on the wrong foot, really. I should have taken more notice of the area around the pool this morning; the killer may have left evidence there. It's probably too late now, with the police already in residence and the room locked up. As there's nothing either of us can do about that, I'd like you to talk to the servants and to listen to them, too. For a start, how many are there?"

"Wouldn't Miss Diana be able to tell you that?"

"Oh yes, very probably, but she has enough on her plate at the moment without me asking inane questions about the domestic staff. Besides, you can find out things that neither she, nor I, ever could."

Eleanor got up and began to pace back and forth in front of the window, listing her questions while she walked, and ticking them off on her fingers as she thought of them.

"How did Mrs Cuthbert treat her staff? Was she as rude to them as she was to Ann and me and as abusive to them as she was to her children and the doctor? Did the servants like her, or hate her? I'm sure they are very shocked, but is anyone in particular secretly pleased, perhaps?"

"They might all be pleased, but that doesn't mean they killed her."

"Oh, I know that. I'm just trying to get a feel for the mood below stairs. I'm sure you'll soon discover how things worked. I've only met

Cripps, the butler, and a couple of young serving maids. Cripps seems all right, though he's a little young for the job."

"Maybe Mrs Cuthbert liked younger men."

Eleanor stopped her pacing and stared at her maid. "Heavens, Tilly! What are you implying?"

"Not that." A shake of the head. "Some older women like to have younger men about the place, so I've heard."

"Have you, indeed? Well, perhaps. There is the secretary, Aubrey Vernon. He's not very old. I've just been talking to him and he seems unlikely as the killer, but he has his own key to the house, so could have come in earlier, committed the murder and gone away again." Eleanor's lips twitched from side to side as she considered this new idea. "Anyway, do your best, Tilly. The servants will talk to you, and in front of you, so much easier than they would with me. They'd consider my questioning them an impertinence, no doubt."

"I'd also like to know at what time Mrs Cuthbert was first found and why that water was so cold."

Tilly, at that moment more concerned about clothing than corpses, wrinkled her forehead. "Eh?"

"Someone below stairs must be responsible for heating the water every day. I'd like to know who it was and how the system worked. Have you got all that?"

"I think so, my lady. You want to know who murdered Mrs Cuthbert and why."

Eleanor laughed, then gazed fondly at her maid and gave her the same warning she'd given Ann less than an hour earlier

"Be careful, though, old girl. One of them may be a killer, remember. I'd hate for something to happen to you."

Tilly sniffed. "Well, don't forget the feeling's mutual. I don't fancy coming 'ere to work if anything happens to you."

"I shall be fine," Eleanor replied, and fervently hoped it was true.



Chapter 9



Having given Tilly her instructions, Eleanor went downstairs again in search of Diana. If her friend really wanted her to look into Irene's death then some hard questions had to be asked. The most important of which, to Eleanor's mind, was who stood to benefit — and by how much?

It wasn't easy, however, in the midst of their bereavement, to probe into a family's financial affairs, especially when they had lost their mother in such a shocking and violent way. It had to be done, and Eleanor's one hope was that she could do so in as gentle and compassionate a manner as possible.

Diana was on her own in the drawing room, sitting in one of the many roomy armchairs. She had clearly been crying, and pleated a wet handkerchief between her fingers while she gazed into space. She looked around on Eleanor's entry and flashed a wan smile.

"How are you?" Eleanor crossed the room and bent to kiss her friend's still damp cheek. "I trust that Inspector Logan wasn't too harsh in his questioning."

"Hmm." Diana grimaced at the memory. "He was pretty brutal. He's in the study now with Raphael, though if he treats him as a suspect as much as he did me, then there's likely to be ructions. Still." She shrugged. "What can I do for you? If you're looking for Ann, she's with Eugenie in one of the treatment rooms."

"No, no, it was you I wanted to speak to." Eleanor sat down in the chair next to Diana. "I was wondering what you all intend to do now. Will you keep the business going?"

"Yes. For the time being, at least. I'm very keen to extend the clinic's offerings, including the residential treatments, although Mother wasn't so keen on the idea –"

"Oh? Why was that?"

Mrs Cuthbert had appeared an astute business woman, not the sort to pass up on an opportunity to increase the clinic's income.

"Well, it would mean taking on more staff, both for cleaning the rooms, making beds, and so on, and to be trained in the use of our beauty products. There are various logistical problems that would need sorting out, but there's time for that. The four of us haven't had a chance to sit down together and take stock, yet."

"That's understandable. With the police, and a couple of guests swarming all over the house, you can't feel the place is your own, let alone have an intelligent conversation, or make plans for the future."

Diana nodded and put out a hand towards her friend. "It's so nice that I have you here, Ann too. It makes it so much easier when you have someone who understands what you are going through. Mother's death has hit poor Persephone very hard so we'll have to wait for her before we can make any decisions."

"And the rest of you? Haven't you all been hit hard, my dear?" Eleanor tilted her head to one side.

"Oh, I suppose so, but we are that bit older. We'll cope." She brushed a few wisps of loose hair off her face revealing frown lines on her forehead for the first time.

"Diana, I'm sorry to have to ask you this, but who benefits from your mother's death?"

"We all do, to some extent or other, both financially and in other ways."

"Really? What are they?"

A sad smile played around Diana's lips. "I was thinking of Raphael. He hated working for the clinic. Now he'll be able to pursue his dream and I doubt that he'll stay."

Eleanor wondered if that was a good enough reason to have killed Irene. It might be, and she'd come across weaker motives before. There had been Howard Eisenbach, the attractive young American in her first case. He'd wanted to pursue a dream, too, and murdered his millionaire father just so he could become a racing driver.

"What about Eugenie? Will she stay with you?"

Diana shrugged. "I've no idea. I'm hoping she'll continue to work here. I'd like the clinic to keep going, make it my life's work as it was my mother's, and for that I'm going to need her support, Persephone's too. They are both fully trained and very good at what they do."

"I'm sure. Ann spoke highly of the facial she received yesterday."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

Feeling uncomfortable, Eleanor rubbed her palms together. Not for the first time she asked herself if she had chosen the right career, for there was something singularly distasteful about probing the financial arrangements of an old friend's family. Yet it had to be done.

"Do you know the provisions of your mother's will? Did she really change it as often as Eugenie suggested?"

Diana sighed. "It sometimes felt like it. Raphael always claimed that mother used the excuse of a new will to keep us all in line." She held up a hand. "Before you ask, I'm sure that's not the case. I think it had more to do with mother's investments and how well they were doing, or not as the case may be. If she was well off, she liked to include small legacies to charities, or new members of staff."

"And if she wasn't?"

"Then, as far as I know, she took them out again." Diana's smile was weak, as if she found this behaviour unaccountable and was apologising for her mother's parsimonious nature.

"Will the business or the house have to be sold so that everyone gets their share of the estate?"

Diana gave a violent shake of the head. "I'm sure it won't and if it does, we'll work something out between us." She sighed. "That's something else I've got to do, phone the solicitor. There's so much to think of at a time like this. I suppose I ought to make a list."

Eleanor smiled. "It might be helpful."

It might also help if her brother and sisters took some of the workload off her shoulders. Was Diana keeping everything in her own hands in order to be busy? Had the others offered and been rebuffed? Diana would certainly need their help and support in the days to come, with solicitors, funeral directors, and maybe even accountants to deal with. All of that on top of the funeral itself, plus the outcome of the police investigation, and Eleanor's own enquiries.

"What about Aubrey Vernon?" Eleanor asked. "Ann and I have just spoken to him and he seems worried about his future. Will you keep him on?"

"I should think so, we will still need a secretary, even if he won't be doing quite the same thing that mother had him doing." She lifted a hand and let it fall. "Like I said, until we've thrashed things out between us, I can't say anything for certain. For the time being we carry on as we are, although I've obviously had to cancel appointments for today."

"And what about Doctor Bernstein?"

"What about him? Emanuel is part of the family. This is his home, and he is in the middle of developing more products in our *Nile Queen* range. He is an essential part of this business."

"So, he'll stay on?"

"I'd like them both to stay on, of course, but if the doctor feels like enough is enough — he is getting on, after all — then I shall quite understand."

"I see." Eleanor got up and crossed to the mantelpiece, looking for the first time at a display of photographs. She picked one up and peered closely at it. "Is this your mother?"

"Yes, it was taken not long before she married. The dark figure in the background is actually my father."

"How old was she?"

"I think she was around twenty-eight when that was taken. She was born in 1868."

Eleanor did a rapid calculation. Mrs Cuthbert must have been fifty-six, not quite as old as Eleanor had assumed. A fact that might be attributable to the drying effects of the Egyptian climate.

"She was very beautiful."

"Mother? Yes, she was, and quite a free and independent spirit for the times. She first went out to Egypt in 1884 when she was only about sixteen. She went with her father, a colonel in the British Army who was stationed out there and fell in love with the place."

"She must have had an interesting life." Eleanor put the photograph back. With a degree of surprise she realised she knew little of Diana's early life, despite them having spent some time at school together. She and Ann were barely fourteen when they'd met Diana

"Oh, she did. At eighteen, fascinated with the ancient monuments she could see all over the place, she travelled around, up and down the Nile, exploring and learning as much as she could. She married my father and returned to this house where we were all born. When he died, she packed us all off to boarding schools and returned to Egypt. According to mother, that's when she did most of her research and formulated the idea of making her own cosmetics and beauty preparations."

"Was she still in touch with anyone she met out there?"

Diana shook her head and looked doubtful. "Not as far as I'm aware. Only Doctor Bernstein. They met in Egypt but he returned to his home in Switzerland at some point. They were reacquainted in 1914 and travelled back to England together."

Eleanor nodded to herself. For one wild moment it had occurred to her that Irene had made enemies in the land of the pharaohs, but the thought of an Egyptian assassin skulking around Dulwich in the early morning ten years later was frankly laughable.

"Did she have any friends locally?"

The question brought a frown to Diana's brow and another shake of her head. "Not really. My mother was a very self-contained person. She didn't seem to need friends, and having seen so much, and done so much with her own life, she thought she had little in common with people here. She thought of them as staid, I guess, and in the normal run of things had little to do with them."

Just at that moment, they were interrupted by the butler.

"Excuse me, Miss Diana. Would you be so kind as to spare a minute, please. Mrs Barker says it's impossible to cook with all these policeman in and out of the kitchen, and is threatening to hand in her notice."

"Heavens! Whatever next?"

Diana flew from her chair and raced past Cripps. He gave Eleanor a little bow and went out, pulling the door to behind him.

Left to her own devices, Eleanor prowled the room and took stock of the situation. By the sound of things, both Diana and Raphael had a motive for removing Irene — Diana to take over the business and to push her own ideas through, and Raphael to pursue his dream of being an artist.

She would have to wait and see with regards to Eugenie and Persephone. The latter, although apparently the most affected by her mother's death, might have some hidden reason for killing her. Perhaps she felt swamped and restricted by too much maternal affection.

Bernstein was a conundrum, and hardly as old as Diana claimed. She had seemed doubtful about him wanting to stay on at the clinic without Irene in charge. Was that really the case, or did Diana have her own reasons for wanting rid of him?

Talking to Diana had not improved her low opinion of Irene Cuthbert by one iota, but that wouldn't stop her doing her job and bringing the killer to justice.

But how?

If the police had finished all their interviews by now, then Eleanor needed to speak to the rest of the family. Would they, and Doctor Bernstein, be as happy to answer Eleanor's questions as Aubrey and Diana had been?

She sighed. There was only one way to find out.



Chapter 10



About to go in search of Raphael, Eleanor was forestalled when her quarry walked into the drawing room, throwing the door wide and then slamming it behind him.

“Bloody police!” He crossed to the tall drinks cabinet in the corner and started rattling glasses and bottles.

Eleanor glanced at the clock — it said barely half-past eleven. A little early to be drinking, she thought, and assumed his interview with Inspector Logan had not gone well. Doubtful that he had noticed her presence, she shifted in her chair as he splashed a goodly amount of liquid into a glass.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said. “Would you like one?” He put the bottle back on a shelf and waved his hand towards the rest of the cabinet’s contents.

“No, thank you,” she replied, ignoring his rudeness. “I might have a glass of something with lunch.”

Eleanor had been thinking of water, but Raphael said, “Why not? We have a cellar full of wine. Red and white, all good vintages. In fact that’s a darn good idea of yours. I’ll tell Cripps to decant some.”

He was beginning to sound drunk already, yet he’d barely sipped his drink. Perhaps the thought of being able to do as he pleased had gone to his head.

Eleanor murmured, neither accepting nor refusing the offer of wine, and watched him through wary eyes as he put his drink on the mantelpiece and came towards her.

"You'd be a good subject to paint, my lady. A pair of fine eyes and excellent bone structure." He reached out and took her chin in his hand. Eyes blazing, she batted it away.

"And you have a nerve. Sit down, Raphael, and tell me how you got on with the police."

He rescued his drink and subsided into a chair. She noticed that he had effected a change of clothes since she had last seen him. Gone was the business suit and tie, which had been replaced with a loose blouson style shirt and a cravat. Very bohemian. Perhaps he saw himself as Rembrandt.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Inspector Logan is determined to give nothing away, though he appears convinced that the murderer is someone in the house. Preposterous! I told him someone must have broken in and killed mother."

Eleanor didn't think it preposterous. It was pretty much the same conclusion she'd come to herself.

"For what purpose? Did your mother have enemies?" Enemies, she might have pointed out, that could evaporate clean away leaving all the doors locked behind them.

"Not that I know of, but she might have done. She was a very successful woman. There were bound to be some who resented that." He nodded to himself as if pleased with this reasoning.

"Like who?"

He cast her a sharp look. "You're beginning to sound like Inspector Logan. How should I know?"

"But what if he's right? What if it was someone within Cuthbert House that murdered your mother?"

"Well, it wasn't me." He took a gulp of his drink, then brushed the back of his hand over his mouth. "Anyway, why should you care? I'm not even sure why you and your friend are still here."

It was almost the same thing the secretary had said. Eleanor bit back a retort to his childish petulance and wondered whether to tell him the truth. It would have been far better if Diana had announced at breakfast that she had asked her and Ann to stay, even if she hadn't given a reason why. Now, Eleanor suspected she'd face the same level of resistance from everyone.

"Because Diana asked us to. It is no mere morbid curiosity on our part, believe me."

"Oh, God. We'll probably get sightseers." He groaned and put his head in his hands.

He might be right, at that, though at least Cuthbert House had stout walls and railings to keep them out.

"Come, come, it might not be that bad, and you could always sell them some of your paintings."

It was a facetious comment, but for a moment Raphael appeared to take it seriously. His eyes lit with enthusiasm, his demeanour changed from listless to purposeful, and he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. The change in him didn't last.

"Nah," he said. "The press will get hold of it and there'll be newspaper men the length and breadth of the avenue." He flung a hand out towards the window.

"Then it would be as well to solve your mother's death quickly, don't you think?"

"That's down to the police."

Eleanor picked her words with care. "I have a little experience in these matters."

Raphael sat back, crossed his legs and gave Eleanor an appraising stare. "Really?"

Once again, Eleanor heard echoes of Aubrey Vernon in his reaction. She gritted her teeth and smiled sweetly.

"Will you tell me about the clinic from a business perspective, please?"

"I can't think why you'd want to know."

"Then humour me. At least it will help to pass the time."

He laughed. "You're more persistent than old Logan. Well, all right. Why not?" He took a sip from his tumbler. "I'm sure Diana will have told you about mother's time in Egypt. Well, she started out making and selling cosmetics and because they were supposedly based on some formula mother discovered while she was out there, she called her small business Karnak Cosmetics. She stuck at this for several years, then branched out into offering beauty treatments. She and Bernstein came up with various preparations, but a lot of them are bought in."

"From Chicago?" she asked, remembering what Aubrey Vernon had told her.

"Yes, that's right. Mother was actually looking at getting them made in bulk over here — to her own and the doctor's recipe, of course — but hadn't yet found a company to do so. Diana will have to do that, now, and she'd better be quick about it. Changing the focus of the business to turn the house into a beauty clinic involved a large investment in modern equipment and furniture."

Had the investment been recouped, or was the clinic in straitened circumstances? Could that be a motive for Irene's murder?

"And the idea for residential courses came from Diana?"

He nodded. "Yes, we have five spare bedrooms. She thought we could put them to good use."

"What about the extra staff you'll need for that?"

"Oh, we'll have to recruit more, right enough, if we do go that route. We might make do with the girls doing the treatments, but we'd need more domestic and kitchen staff. I hope Diana has taken that into her calculations."

"Are you involved in the treatments, Raphael?"

"Heavens no. I'm strictly admin, and advertising."

"I hope you won't mind me asking, but is the clinic profitable?"

"Ha! Yes, very. I have to say that mother's idea turned into a regular little goldmine. How she managed to persuade women who had no need of them to buy her products is beyond me." He waved a hand. "You women are a vain lot."

"Is it vanity to want to make the best of oneself?" Eleanor's only cosmetic was mascara, used to darken her blonde lashes. She had never felt the need for powder and paint, though did not decry their use by others.

His lips twisted into a sneer. "Some women could use every cosmetic in the book and still not be beautiful, while some, like yourself, are naturally so."

"So you are selling a dream, and a profitable one at that."

His eyes narrowed. "You could look at it like that. Mother was a snob at heart and if she sold a dream it was only to those who could afford it, people like yourself and Lady Ann, but what has all this got to do with her death?"

Eleanor leaned forward, resting her chin upon her fisted hands. "I'm not sure. I'm trying to understand what might be the motive behind this murder, and a little background is always useful when I'm groping toward a solution."

"Leave it to the police, I say." He waved the hand holding the tumbler, the glass now nearly empty. "Their blundering around is tiresome, I grant you, but it's their job."

"What if they don't find the killer? Or arrest the wrong person?"

He blenched at the thought and looked decidedly uncomfortable at the prospect. Did he think Inspector Logan suspected him?

"Well, I can't say I have any confidence in the police, so that's a definite possibility. At the moment they're looking in the wrong place,

in my view. I reckon it was an outsider, a chance burglar that she disturbed. They should be looking further afield."

She shook her head, dissatisfied. "How did they get in? Cripps is certain that he locked the place up."

"He may be mistaken and not want to admit that he forgot. I wouldn't if the outcome of my forgetfulness and lack of attention to duty was murder. The police need to work on him and get him to confess. A woman couldn't do that – they aren't strong enough."

"To apply the thumbscrews, you mean?" A sardonic smile hovered over Eleanor's lips. "I thought we'd got past torture as a means of gaining confessions."

He shifted in his chair and gave her a piercing look. "Perhaps, but what is your interest in all of this, Lady Eleanor? You are asking an awful lot of dashed impertinent questions for a mere client at a beauty clinic. Are you a detective, an amateur that Diana has hired to solve mother's murder?"

He'd had no opportunity to confer with Aubrey, so was that a lucky guess? Eleanor debated what to tell him. She really must go and speak to Diana again, and ask her to inform the family of her position there.

"You'll be doomed to failure if you are," he said, before she could reply. "Women aren't capable of analytical thinking. You'll be barking up the wrong tree, just as the police are doing."

Eleanor's temper flared. She held it in with difficulty, merely flicking her fingers at Raphael's assertion.

"Have you ever been to Egypt, Raphael?"

"No, I haven't. There was talk of the five of us going as a family. Mother often said she wanted to go back and she talked of a cruise down the Nile. We nearly went last year, but Persephone fell ill. She's not very strong and mother was concerned the travelling would take too much out of her." He gave a sudden grin. "As a result, the nearest I've been to the land of Ozymandias is the British Museum." He drained his glass. "I've also attended an exhibition of David Roberts'

paintings of Egypt and the Near East. I went several times actually, and bought a book of his illustrations when mother asked me to paint the passage and the pool walls."

"That was your mother's idea was it?"

His face twisted sourly. "I let her think so, but I worked on her for weeks before she agreed."

"And the bust of Nefertiti on the half-landing? That's also your work, I understand."

He nodded. "Yes, it's not very good, I only had photos to work from, so the shape and structure isn't quite right."

"Nonsense! It's instantly recognisable. What did you make it from?"

"Clay, which was the devil's own job to form into the correct shape, and the only reason you think it recognisable is because of the paint-work. I ought to stick to that in future."

"So, what will you do, now? Will you stay on at the clinic, or —"

"Starve in a garret, somewhere?"

"No, no." Eleanor waved a hand. "I doubt that's likely, given your talent."

"Well, I shall have to stay here, at least until mother's will is read and the bequests made. After that, I may like to travel myself, although I'd rather go north and east than south. Either way, it will be good to put all this behind me and get away for a while and take my art to the masses."

Eleanor was about to ask him what he meant when the door opened and Sergeant Harris entered.

"Begging your pardon, my lady, but Inspector Logan wants to know if you can spare him a few minutes, please."

"Ha! Best of luck." Raphael drained his glass and saluted her as she rose to her feet and accompanied the policeman out of the room.



Chapter 11



Inspector Logan did not look up when his sergeant announced Eleanor's arrival. He waved a hand at a chair and continued to peruse the notepad on his lap, running a finger under the words, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Eleanor did not sit down immediately; she gazed around the room. Diana had called it a study, but with several bookshelves lining the walls, it appeared more of a library. The books were grouped in categories, all neatly labelled. She spotted one shelf that said Egypt and was about to go closer when Inspector Logan gave a cough and she transferred her attention to him.

"Sit down, Lady Eleanor. I'm hoping this won't take long. Can you tell me what you are doing here at Cuthbert House?"

Eleanor suspected that he already knew the answer to that, but acquiesced readily enough. She sank into a comfortable leather Chesterfield and told him she was there to partake of the beauty treatments on offer.

He raised an eyebrow and surveyed her with a dour look. "Really? I should hardly have said you were in need of beautifying. Was there perhaps some other reason for your presence?"

His attempt at flattery — if that was what it was — surprised Eleanor and put her on guard.

"No, Inspector, there was not."

"Had you been here before?"

"No, this is the first time. I met Diana Cuthbert before the war when she and I were at school together, along with Lady Ann Carstairs, but I've never been to her home before."

"Or met other members of her family? Like her mother, for instance?"

Eleanor shook her head. "No, only Diana."

"All right. I know I've asked you this before, but can we go over the events of this morning again, please?" He looked down at his notebook. "You said you heard the maid running along the corridor outside your room."

"Yes, that's right, I did. I opened my door and saw her tapping on Diana's door."

"Was Miss Cuthbert asleep, do you know? Did the maid wake her?"

Eleanor pondered the question, screwing up her face in an effort of remembrance. "Yes, I think so. It took Diana a while to answer the door."

"And then?"

"She told the maid to go for Doctor Bernstein then went back into her room for a robe. I didn't see her come out, because I was already on my way downstairs by then."

"Did you see anyone around?"

"No, I didn't. I knew my way, because Diana had given Ann and me a tour of the house yesterday."

Logan tapped his pencil on the pad. "And what did you see when you got to the swimming pool?"

Eleanor had a clear picture in her mind, a tableau of the dark-suited butler, the sobbing maid, and the floating figure of Irene, white and flabby like a monstrous whale in the frigid air. She shivered.

"Three people. Cripps, the butler, and another maid, trying to get Mrs Cuthbert out of the water."

"Was she dead already?"

Eleanor frowned. It seemed an odd question, he must know that she was. Was he testing her, or was there some doubt about the time of death?

"Oh yes, I had no doubt about that. The maid was standing on the steps of the pool, absolutely soaked. According to something Cripps said, she must have waded in to reach her mistress."

"Could she have got wet by drowning her?"

"Well, yes, that's perfectly possible, but first she had to overpower Mrs Cuthbert and the maid is only a slip of a thing. I doubt she would have been able to do that. Her mistress was a big woman with more muscle about her than the maid." Eleanor stopped and narrowed her eyes at the Inspector. "Besides," she went on, "did she drown?"

Logan pulled at an earlobe. "Yes, and no."

"Really, Inspector." Eleanor wondered if he were playing with her, or whether Irene's death wasn't as cut and dried as she'd assumed. "What exactly do you mean? Are you referring to the bruise I noticed on the back of Mrs Cuthbert's neck?"

"Ah, yes, and that's why you thought it was murder and told Miss Diana to call us?"

"Exactly so."

"Well, the doctor thinks you were right. The blow knocked her unconscious, then he thinks she was held under the water."

Eleanor shuddered, a movement that Logan noticed. He nodded in agreement.

"Not a nice thought, is it?" he said. "There will be a post mortem, of course, just in case there was drink, drugs, or poison involved, but the doctor doesn't think so."

"How long will that take? I suppose there will be an inquest?" If Eleanor's attendance at that was necessary — and, as she was the one who'd called foul play, she thought it might be — then the authorities would let her know. She would be able to go home to Piccadilly in the meantime and return to Dulwich as and when called upon to do so.

She didn't fancy the idea of staying too long at Cuthbert House. Her friendship with Diana was tenuous at best, and spending time with the rest of the family was, she realised, an unappealing prospect.

Logan shrugged, lifting his shoulders almost to his ears. "Yes, there'll be an inquest as this is clearly a case of murder. As to how long the doctor will take, your guess is as good as mine, my lady. Frankly, I'm surprised he actually voiced an opinion at all. Most doctors don't in the case of violent death. They like to hedge their bets." He looked disgusted at this behaviour on the part of the medical profession and the corners of his mouth turned down. "Still, murder it is. Do you know the family well enough to suggest who might have done it?"

Eleanor shook her head. "Sadly no, but there does appear to be a surfeit of motives."

"Oh?" He leaned forward eagerly, expecting her to continue, but Eleanor was not about to be drawn.

"I'm beginning to suspect so," she said, choosing her words with care.

"Then please elaborate."

"No, Inspector. I have no wish to incriminate the innocent. All I will say is that Irene Cuthbert was, in my opinion, something of a petty tyrant, who rode roughshod over her family's hopes and dreams. It's possible that someone snapped, but which of them it was, I cannot tell you."

Eleanor meant it. She'd not had time to speak to all the family yet, nor Doctor Bernstein, and then there would be Tilly's report on the staff to digest. Not until she had proof and was sure of the killer's identity would she confide her suspicions to Inspector Logan.

"You seem to have come to a conclusion about Mrs Cuthbert on a very short acquaintance," he remarked.

"I'm afraid I did, rather. She was, I thought, unnecessarily rude to both Lady Ann and myself the moment we were introduced. I'm afraid that put my back up, and I saw and heard nothing during the rest of the

evening to make me change my mind about her." She gave him a grim smile. "However, I didn't kill her."

To her surprise, his eyes twinkled. "Most of us can put up with a fair amount of rudeness without resorting to murder, eh?"

"Exactly, Inspector."

"Your friend, Lady Ann, tells me that you are a private enquiry agent. Is that right?"

Eleanor sat up a little straighter in her chair and met his gaze with her deep blue eyes. "Yes, it is."

"Well, then, stay out of this case, please. This is my investigation and I don't need amateurs getting in my way. If you do hear or see something germane to the enquiry, I expect you to tell me and not act upon your own initiative. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly." Eleanor got to her feet. "Will that be all?"

"For now, thank you, yes."

With a last glance at the books, she made her way past them and to the door, happy that the interview was over. She did not resent him telling her to mind her own business, though she no longer thought of herself as an amateur detective. She had solved some difficult cases since she first became involved in murder earlier in the year. Besides, with Diana having asked her to stay and help, this case *was* her own business. She wasn't about to go back on her word just to keep Inspector Logan happy.

Eleanor glanced at her wristwatch. She wanted to speak to Eugenie and the best way to do that was to ask if she was available to provide Eleanor with a manicure. That would be a better option than having a facial or another of the clinic's so-called treatments. She didn't feel ready yet to put her face into any of the Cuthberts' hands and laughed at herself for being so suspicious.

Diana came out of the below stairs door when Eleanor also entered the hall, but in reply to her question she said, "I'm afraid not. Eugenie has gone into the village."

"Oh? Do the police know?"

Diana smiled. "Yes, don't worry. They insisted on searching her bag before she went, mind you, which didn't please her. She's gone to return books to the library as they were due back today. Quite honestly, I think this whole shocking situation has got on top of her, and she needed to get away and have some time to herself."

"I see. How are things below stairs? Have you managed to persuade Mrs Barker to stay?"

"Yes, for the moment things are much quieter." She rested a hand on Eleanor's arm. "Thank goodness you sent for your maid. She offered to help with the cooking and is generally mucking in all round. It's taken some of the pressure off the others and they've calmed down considerably."

"Good, I'm delighted to hear it. Tilly is certainly a treasure. I don't know what I would do without her."

"Thanks to your treasure we should get some lunch. She and Mrs Barker are preparing it now. There'll be sandwiches and coffee in the dining room in about half an hour."

"Excellent. In the meantime, I'm going to speak to Persephone."

A crease of worry appeared on Diana's brow. "Please be gentle with her, Eleanor, she's not strong."

"Of course." Eleanor's smile was a trifle forced. She was not in the habit of browbeating people.

"She went into the garden, I think. None of us are keen gardeners, or spend much time out there, and there isn't much to see, but for Persephone the garden has always been a sanctum of sorts." She pointed off to her right. "Go through the French windows in the drawing room. It's the easiest and quickest way to get there."

"All right. Thank you."

"Don't forget about lunch, and please bring Persephone back with you."



Chapter 12



Contrary to the impression that Eleanor had gained from talking to Diana, the garden was filled with a variety of shrubs and perennials that would flower later in the year.

Her young friend, Joe Minshull, would no doubt feel at home here, keen gardener that he was, though he was more interested in growing vegetables than anything ornamental.

She thought fondly of him now, as she watched Persephone tending a sad-looking rose. Tall and straggly, the rose clung to a trellis attached to the garden's stone wall, as if shying away from the sharp-bladed secateurs in Persephone's hand.

"Hello. You've a job on your hands there, I see," Eleanor said, and seated herself on a stone bench close by.

"Oh, hello, Lady Eleanor. It's the wrong time of year to be pruning, really, but it needed tying in and some of these branches are overlong and whippy. I hope it will bloom in another month or so."

It was quite a long speech for the girl and Eleanor was pleased to note there was a deal more colour in Persephone's cheeks than there had been at breakfast.

"Diana said you were going to make rose water from the petals."

"Yes, Doctor Bernstein said he would help me with that. I've found some old recipes that date back to Elizabethan times and he said I could use his laboratory for trying them out. We could use them as the basis for our own perfumes."

She sounded young and very eager and Eleanor wondered how old she was.

"Are you fond of gardening?" she asked.

"No, not really. Nor working in the clinic, either, but the rose water sounded interesting and coming out here, having time to myself, is far better than being surrounded by the family."

"Don't you like your family?"

"Oh, they're all right, but I don't want to spend every hour of every day for the rest of my life with them." She dropped the secateurs into a small basket at her feet and pushed a strand of deep auburn hair off her forehead.

"I don't suppose you'll have to do that. Do you have a sweetheart?"

"I do, actually. I see him most days." She looked coy and blushed.

"Well then, one day you might get married and have a home of your own."

Persephone cast a despairing look at Eleanor. "I might and he's very keen."

"And you?" Eleanor remembered her own first love, a groom on her father's estate. She had been fifteen and thought herself wildly in love, until she realised he'd rather spend time with his horses than with her.

"I'm not so sure. He says he's going to be rich and wants us to get married and get away from here."

Eleanor laughed. "How does he intend getting rich?"

"I don't know. I think it's just talk really, but getting married isn't really what I wanted to do."

"And what was that?" Eleanor patted the seat beside her, inviting Persephone to take a seat.

"I always dreamed of being a dancer, but mother would never hear of it." With a graceful movement, she drooped onto the bench, a sad little figure, as if seeing herself in the role of the Dying Swan, her arms close together, her hands clasped loosely on the lap of her skirts.

"It's a hard life, you know. My mother was a dancer before she married."

Persephone's eyes widened. "Really? What sort of a dancer?"

"She was a ballet dancer in Russia."

"Oh, I'd have loved to have been a ballerina. When I was younger, I begged and pleaded with mother to let me have lessons. She always refused. She was a Philistine with no art in her soul."

Eleanor, surprised at the ferocity in her tone, glanced sharply at Persephone, who hurried on.

"She was exactly the same with Raphael. You've seen his work around the house, you know how good an artist he is, yet mother put that talent to use only for making her money."

"Making money is not to be sneered at, especially if one is a single woman with a large family to support." Eleanor spoke gently, not wanting the girl to think she was being chided in any way. "Why do you say your mother had no art? Surely, she had her own talents and skills, and the clinic is proof of that."

"It's proof that she knew how to make money." Her mouth twisted into a sneer above the pointed chin. She looked very much as Raphael had done earlier.

"And maybe her art lay in making the preparations used and sold by the clinic."

"But that's Doctor Bernstein's doing. Mother was no chemist, she couldn't have made the creams and lotions we use, and she never gave him the credit he deserved."

"Did Doctor Bernstein tell you that?"

"He didn't need to. We all knew it was true. Mother was horrid and I hated her!"

Eleanor began to wonder whether Irene's youngest daughter had a crush on the doctor. She said nothing, waiting with an encouraging smile, for the girl to continue. She was sure there was more to come.

"I...I..." Persephone's bottom lip quivered. "I'm sorry, you must think I'm awful talking about my mother like this, but I didn't love her, and now she's dead. I feel so guilty." She put her head in her hands and sobbed as though her heart would break.

Without a second's hesitation, Eleanor put an arm around the girl's heaving shoulders and pulled her close. She said nothing and waited for the storm to pass.

When it did, she offered a clean handkerchief from her pocket. "You poor thing, perhaps I ought to ask the doctor to give you another sedative."

Persephone looked up and shook her head. "No, please don't do that, your ladyship. I never took the last one. I'm not a child any more. I don't want to be sent to my room and made to go to sleep, and be left out of things." She pulled a strand of damp hair off her cheek and dabbed at her eyes. "Please don't say anything."

Eleanor smiled. "All right, then, if you'd rather I didn't. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. Can I ask if Inspector Logan has spoken to you yet?"

Persephone scowled and nodded. "Yes. I didn't tell him how I felt about my mother. You won't —"

"No, of course not. I just wondered what he'd asked you."

"Only if I'd heard mother go downstairs."

"And did you?"

"No. I didn't hear a thing. I was reading until late last night — it was gone midnight when I switched the light off — and as a result I slept through until Diana knocked on the door with the awful news."

"Whereabouts is your room?"

"Oh, it's right at the end of the corridor, next to Eugenie's." She pointed upwards to the row of first floor windows. "That one, see?"

Eleanor glance followed the pointing finger. She nodded. "Diana's room is the one in the middle?" she asked.

"Yes, then Raphael's, then Doctor Bernstein's. He doesn't often use that one. He has a small bedroom next to his laboratory and uses that more often than not."

"And your mother's room?"

"Oh, that's the large one on the opposite side of the corridor. It faces the front of the house, not the garden."

Cuthbert House was certainly blessed with plenty of bedrooms and whoever built it must have had a larger family than Irene and her husband possessed. No wonder Diana was thinking of utilising the rooms that currently lay empty, and expanding the business.

"It's strange that no one appears to have heard your mother leaving her room in what was probably the early hours."

"Not really. Mother was always up at the crack of dawn. Early to bed, early to rise —that was her dictum. If anyone did hear her moving about, they'd not think anything of it." She sighed. "I almost wish I had heard her. I can't help thinking that if I had been up with the lark, mother might not be dead. As if this whole thing is my fault because I didn't love her."

She gulped back a sob. Eleanor hugged her again.

"I don't see why you should think that. Not everyone loves their mother." Nor did every mother love her child, she might have added, and Irene Cuthbert hadn't struck her as the motherly type.

In their separate ways, her offspring had all tried to please her, yet all thought they had failed. Was Persephone the only one blaming herself? Did that show she hadn't committed murder, or was she blaming herself because she had?

Persephone wiped away a tear. "I sometimes wondered why she had children."

There were a number of answers Eleanor could have given to that, but when she'd agreed to stay at Cuthbert House, it wasn't to teach the facts of life to Diana's youngest sister.

"How old are you, Persephone?"

"Eighteen, though I always think I look much older."

Eleanor disagreed, but had the sense not to say so. She was remembering herself at that age and trying not to make comparisons. Persephone had led a sheltered existence, protected by her older siblings and a domineering mother from an outside world that, Eleanor suspected, she wanted to embrace with open arms.

"Well, you could still be a dancer."

"No, it's too late." The girl shook her head, shoulders drooping. "I'm too old to start."

"If it's truly your dream, then it is never too late, my dear." She grinned at the girl beside her. "I know a dancing school that will take you as a pupil even at the grand old age of eighteen."

"You do?" Persephone's face lit up. "Oh, that would be wonderful. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. I'll give you the name and address before I leave here." Eleanor rose to her feet. "Now, let's go and get some lunch."

Eleanor got to her feet, waiting while Persephone put away her gardening tools in a small shed half hidden in the shrubbery, then linked arms with the girl and strolled back indoors.

The sound of animated conversation reached them from the dining room, but Eleanor wanted a breathing space to wash her hands and make a few notes on her talk with Persephone before she faced the rest of the Cuthbert clan. She had learned quite a lot from talking to Diana, Raphael, and Persephone, and now she needed to take stock before tackling Eugenie and the doctor.

"I need to clean myself up," the girl said, looking down at her hands. "I shan't be long."

Eleanor watched her go towards the downstairs bathroom and made her way upstairs. She smiled at the beautiful bust of Nefertiti on the landing, feeling that she had at least learned one thing from Persephone — which sibling was in which bedroom.

But wait, her thoughts continued as she turned and climbed up to the corridor, she had also discovered that young, innocent-looking Persephone had hated her mother that much she had a perfectly good motive for murder.

Three suspects down, two to go.



Chapter 13



When Eleanor returned to the dining room, everyone else was already there and tucking into their lunch.

Raphael had been as good as his word, she noticed, for two bottles of wine stood open on the table, together with several plates of expertly cut sandwiches, and both he and Ann had a glass in their hands. She took a seat next to her friend and reached for the water jug.

Diana sat at the end of the table, staring down its length at the doctor.

“How is Edna?” she asked.

“Not as hysterical as she was,” he remarked drily. “The struggle to get your mother out of the pool coupled with the police’s heavy-handed questioning has left her quite distraught. I have given her another sedative.”

“Thank you, doctor.” She turned to Eleanor. “The police have not been kind with my staff. I’m really very cross with Inspector Logan. As you’ve probably gathered, he insisted on seeing poor Edna, even though she had been sent to bed with a hot water bottle after her immersion in the pool. It really is too bad of him.”

She looked most put out, and while Eleanor sympathised, she understood the policeman’s insistence.

“She’s a valuable and important witness,” Eleanor said. “I hope she’ll recover from the ordeal.”

"Yes, well, once again I am indebted for the loan of your maid. There'll be no hysterics from that quarter, I'll warrant."

Ann gurgled with laughter. "Oh, Tilly will put the police in their place, and whip them into shape in the kitchen. She does the same with Eleanor."

Eleanor agreed. "I don't know what I'd do without her."

She helped herself to a sandwich and nibbled away, watching the diners opposite. Raphael appeared to have drunk more than he should, and Eugenie was taking advantage of that by baiting him.

"How are you getting on?" Diana murmured to Eleanor under the hubbub created by her siblings.

Eleanor flashed a warning glance. "Early days."

"Give her a chance," Ann muttered in her friend's defence. "It's only been a couple of hours."

"I still can't quite believe it. We sit here eating and drinking as if nothing had happened. I almost expect mother to walk in at any moment."

"That's only natural," Ann said. She twirled her glass by the stem. "I don't think you ever get over the death of a parent. You just have to carry on and make the best of things. At least you've got a brother and sisters to share the load with and help you through this."

Eleanor was unconvinced that Diana would receive much support from her siblings, but who knew? Irene's death might bring them closer together. Mrs Cuthbert had repressed her children all their lives. Now that they were free to choose their own calling, to follow their own stars, their lives might actually improve. Already her two youngest daughters, Eugenie and Persephone, looked happier.

"You know what, Diana?" Raphael's loud voice interrupted her thoughts. "We ought to drain the pool and board it over. Then we could hire the room out. Perhaps Lady Ann could consider it for a possible party venue."

"Don't be so ghoulish, Raphael."

"Ghoulish? Nonsense, I'm only being practical."

"Actually, Diana, that's not a bad idea." Eugenie backed up her brother, giving him a broad grin and an elbow in the ribs. Eleanor wondered what she was up to.

"Exactly." Raphael waved his glass in the rough direction of Ann and his older sister. "With Egypt and Tutankhamun being all the rage, we ought to take advantage of it."

"Aren't you afraid of bringing the Pharaoh's curse upon our heads, dear?" Eugenie smiled sweetly at him. "Although your paintings make it an ideal place for a fancy dress party."

"Don't talk such rubbish, Eugenie. Mother said there was no such thing. The ancient Egyptians didn't go in for curses." Persephone peeled apart her sandwich to see what was inside. Eleanor thought she'd perked up since their chat in the garden, and was delighted to see she was eating. That was the third sandwich she'd taken.

"Yes, it is a lot of *Unsinn*, tommyrot, as you say." Doctor Bernstein scowled. "It is a story, made up by the press since the death of Lord Carnarvon, in order to sell more newspapers."

"Yes, if there really was a curse of the Pharaohs," Ann said, "you'd think it would have gone after Howard Carter, the archaeologist, and not his patron, wouldn't you?"

"Well, we could be cursed." Eugenie insisted. "I've had several clients cancel their appointments for next week, over and above the ones we cancelled for today."

"What, already?" Diana frowned.

"So Aubrey told me before he went home for his lunch. He said he saw someone he thinks might have been a journalist talking earlier to the policeman at the front gates."

"Damn. It's not as if mother even administered any treatments. Why should clients cancel just because she's dead?"

"Because it's murder, my dear. Murder, pure and simple."

"Stop it, Raphael. Just stop it!" Diana slammed her teacup back on her saucer with a crash.

In Eleanor's estimation, murder was never pure, though she was beginning to think this one would be rather simple in its solving. She desperately hoped so: the constant clashes between the siblings were beginning to irritate.

Time for a diversion.

"I understand you met Mrs Cuthbert in Egypt, Doctor Bernstein?"

He nodded and smiled as if aware of what she was trying to do, and happy to go along with it. "Yes, but only briefly. She had been staying near Karnak for several weeks before we met and was already smitten with the idea of bringing the cosmetics of the ancients up to date for the modern woman.

"I was in a tour group on the way to the mortuary temple of the Pharaoh Queen, Hatshepsut. It is located at Deir el-Bahri not far from Karnak and Irene, who'd already visited it two or three times, asked if she might join us."

"She must have really liked the place," said Ann."

"It is a magnificent monument to a magnificent woman, and Irene was convinced it held secrets that could help her in her quest."

"What sort of secrets?" Eleanor looked around the table, wondering if Irene's children already knew these details of her past, but it appeared not. They seemed as eager to hear what the doctor had to say as she was.

"Well, you have heard of kohl, yes? It is an ancient eye cosmetic with widespread use around the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It was made from a variety of materials, and most of them — such as antimony and lead — are poisonous. Hatshepsut had sent an expedition to the land of Punt — the details are all over the temple walls — and the expedition had returned with frankincense and myrrh, among other things, both valuable commodities."

"What does that have to do with kohl?"

"Hatshepsut is said to have ground charred frankincense to make it, and Irene was searching for the exact details at Deir el-Bahri."

"She found it, too, didn't she?" Diana beamed at the doctor. "But it's not what we use in our brands, is it?"

"Don't you know what's in your products?" Ann sounded surprised, but Diana laughed.

"No fear, I'm no chemist. Mother always said the mix of ingredients was a trade secret."

"She was right," Raphael said, with the merest slurring of his words. "From a business perspective that is. The last thing you want is a competitor getting hold of the formulae for our products. It could be worth a fortune to them."

"That is true," Bernstein agreed. "However, I'm prepared to say that neither our eyeliner nor mascara contain any frankincense. It is far too expensive, even though a little goes a long way. As you say, Diana, your mother found what she was looking for, and a great deal else besides, though by that time I had returned home to Switzerland."

His eyes twinkled at Eleanor, though she sensed a deep sadness there, too. He and Irene had led interesting lives. She hoped to hear more about it when she had the chance to speak to him alone. She had uncovered motive aplenty from the members of Irene's family, but her business partner was a mystery. What reason could he have for killing her?

The idea of a rival stealing the Cuthbert recipes was an intriguing one, though Eleanor thought it unlikely to have been a factor in Irene's murder. The reason behind her death lay much closer to home.

And yet, as she let her gaze travel around the table, she couldn't quite believe it. Had someone here really committed matricide?

Her thoughts were disturbed by Eugenie's quiet, "I can't believe that she's gone", and the chink of bottle against glass, as Raphael topped up his wine.

"Never mind, old fruit, we'll soon find out who did it. Crafty Diana there has her own amateur sleuth at hand. Isn't that right, Lady El'nor."

"Raphael, you're drunk." Diana threw a questioning glance at Eleanor. It was clear she did not know whether to admit it, or not.

Eleanor shrugged. The cat was out of the bag now, but it remained Diana's decision.

"It's true though, isn't it?" Raphael pressed.

"Lady Eleanor is a private enquiry agent, though that is not her reason for being here. However, given the awful event this morning, I took advantage of her presence and asked her to look into mother's death and advise me."

The momentary stunned silence frustrated Eleanor. A sharp intake of breath would have been useful at this point, but the only reaction came from Persephone who leaned forward, staring up the table at Diana as if she had caught her out in a lie.

"But, I thought you said Lady Eleanor was a duke's daughter."

Eleanor smiled. "So I am, though it doesn't mean I have to be an idle one."

"Everyone has to have a job these days," Ann said.

"Yeah." Raphael sneered. "Typical of the rich to take employment from the poor."

Ann wriggled in her chair and Eleanor put a hand against her friend's leg as the soft-footed butler glided into the room with a plate of cakes in each hand.

"The cook thought you might like these, Miss Diana." He placed his offerings on the table and gave a small bow.

"Oh, yum." Eugenie flashed Cripps a wide smile of thanks and reached out a hand for a slab of fruit cake.

Raphael, too, seemed more interested in the plates than in having an argument. Eleanor hoped it would soak up some of the alcohol he'd consumed.

"Thank you, Cripps," Diana said.

He lowered his head in a nod of acknowledgement and withdrew as silently as he'd entered. Eleanor wondered if he'd heard Raphael's announcement of her calling and what he thought if he had. Like everyone else, suspicion hung over him. He might have helped rescue Irene from the water, but that didn't mean he hadn't drowned her in it beforehand.

With the exception of Eleanor and Doctor Bernstein, everyone had a slice of cake. When she had finished eating, Diana rapped on the table with her knuckles.


"I think that it is time for a conference. I rang the solicitor just before lunch and he will be here shortly before three o'clock." She pushed back her chair and went to press a bell at the side of the fireplace. "I shall ask Cripps to bring us a pot of coffee in here, so that you have the chance to sober up, Raph, but we need to thrash things out between us."

"What is it you expect to thrash out, as you put it?" Eugenie put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her fists. "What can we do before we hear what Mr McGovern has to say?"


Diana resumed her seat and Eleanor was delighted to detect a new sense of purpose in her.

"Now that Mother has gone, we need to decide what we all want to do with our lives. The clinic was her world, she built it, ran it, loved it, but I'm aware that we don't all feel the same way about it. I think we need to start making plans for our own, individual futures." She turned her attention to her friends. "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us, but we do need to sort this out. You, too, Doctor Bernstein, though you are welcome to join us in the drawing room when the solicitor arrives."

A sombre-faced Bernstein stood up. "Of course, but please don't forget that I, too, put a lot into this clinic, and I will fight *Zahn und Klaue*, tooth and claw as you have it, if you try to take it away from me. You may plan for your futures all you like, but if one of you killed your mother, then I will see you hang."



Chapter 14



“Go after him.” Eleanor whispered the instruction to Ann as the doctor stormed out. “Take him into the drawing room.”

She rose to her feet, feeling her cheeks redden as Raphael leered across the table at her. That wilful young man had stirred things up quite nicely. He might think that he had spiked her guns, but that only made her more determined to take advantage of the situation he had created. She smiled at Diana, sitting stunned and pale after the doctor’s outburst, and followed Ann out of the room.

She waited in the hall, getting her temper under control and at the same time wondering at the game Raphael was playing, and if even Diana were playing games, too. To what purpose?

She chewed at her lip. There was none she could think of at present.

Smiling to herself at the soft cajoling voice of Ann coming from the drawing room, she lingered a moment longer, working out what to say to the doctor, then went to join them.

“Can I offer you a drink, Lady Eleanor?” The doctor stood at the drinks cabinet, decanter in hand, much as Raphael had done a few hours earlier. Ann already held a crystal balloon glass in her palms. “I felt the need of a brandy, and as you can see, Lady Ann has agreed not to let me drink alone.” He gave a tight, grim smile and sloshed a small amount of liquid into a tumbler.

“Not for me, thanks.”

Eleanor sat in the armchair next to Ann and mouthed the words, *thank you*, at her. When it came to soothing the feelings of disgruntled old gentlemen, her friend was unsurpassed. Young or old, there weren't many who could resist her charms.

"So, is it true you are a detective, my lady?" The doctor relaxed onto a roomy sofa and narrowed his eyes at Eleanor.

"It is, but that has nothing to do with my visit here. Being here at the time Mrs Cuthbert was murdered is a total coincidence."

"Is it?" He shook his head. "Or did someone take advantage of that fact?"

The thought had not occurred to Eleanor, though she immediately had objections to it.

"Wouldn't that be rather stupid of them?" Ann voiced the same protest. "Unless they wanted the crime to be uncovered and solved."

"Solved? Are you that sure of your friend's abilities, my lady?"

"Absolutely."

Afraid that Ann was about to launch another repetition of Eleanor's successes and mention how highly Chief Inspector Blount of Scotland Yard thought of her, Eleanor flashed her friend a warning glance and spoke quickly.

"I've solved a few cases, yes, but I've also had an awful lot of luck."

"Hmm. It still seems an...unusual job for someone of your gender and background."

It was a common refrain and one that Eleanor had heard again and again in the five months since she had taken on her first case. She was used to it now, and no longer let it rankle and get under her skin, though why being a woman, and a duke's daughter at that, should make any difference was beyond her.

"However," Bernstein continued, "I'll grant that you did notice it was murder in this instance..."

"But that isn't the same as laying the culprit by the heels, I quite agree."

The doctor rolled his brandy glass between his palms. "You are investigating, though, yes? As Diana said?"

Eleanor gave him a long hard stare. He was too intelligent a man not to realise that he, too, was a suspect.

"I suggested that Ann and I go home once the police had spoken to us, but Diana asked me to stay, as much for moral support as anything else, I think. I could hardly refuse her request."

"Exemplary behaviour, but that doesn't answer my question. Are you investigating Irene's death?"

"Yes. I would be a poor sort of investigator if I did not feel some natural curiosity, and I certainly think that Diana wants me to solve this murder. She confessed to a deal of doubt that the police would do so."

"And who in this house is the most likely culprit, in your estimation?"

Eleanor shook her head, unwilling to be drawn. "I haven't yet reached that stage in my deliberations, though I have learned a lot about Mrs Cuthbert from her children. I take it that Inspector Logan has spoken to you?"

The question brought the twinkle back into his eyes. "Indeed. He urged me, at length, to confess. As the only foreigner in the household, I am clearly guilty. He is convinced I am a German masquerading as a Swiss." He sipped his brandy. "I have had dual British and Swiss nationality since 1920 but I did not bother to tell him that."

Was Logan really that incompetent? Eleanor grimaced, remembering her own interview and how the Inspector had told her to stay out of his case, but at the same time pass on anything she learned. How typical of a man to want things all his own way.

And what of the man opposite? Alternately glowering and twinkling, Eleanor found him quite an enigma.

"How long had you known Mrs Cuthbert, Doctor?"

"For about ten years. We opened the clinic four years ago, but our relationship dates back far longer, to just before the outbreak of the war."

"That's when you met in Egypt?"

"Yes, I had been on holiday and returned home to Switzerland, where Irene found me a few months later."

"Found you?" Eleanor thought it seemed an odd way of putting it.

Bernstein smiled at her confusion. "Yes, when we first met, as well as talking about the wonders all around us, and Hatshepsut in particular, Irene and I naturally chatted about ourselves. I told her that I had been at university with Fritz Hoffman-La Roche in Basel. When he set up his pharmaceutical factory there I went to work for him and Irene seemed intrigued, asking me if, as well as developing drugs and medicines, I could do the same for cosmetics."

"And could you?" Ann asked.

"I told her I thought it possible, yes. When she turned up in Basel, I was astounded, especially when she invited me to England, and promised me all the facilities I might need. She was as good as her word." He sighed. "A remarkable woman."

"Was she an easy woman to work for?"

His face hardened. "You must ask her children that. I did not work for Irene. I worked with her."

A nice distinction, though it raised other questions.

"Who does the clinic belong to?"

"Both of us. It may be in Irene's house, but the company was jointly owned. If Diana and her siblings think they can rob me of it..." He scowled into his brandy.

Eleanor knew nothing of corporate law, or what happened when one partner in a business died, but if Irene was as good a business woman as everyone said, then she had probably made provision for the clinic in her will. Her solicitor would certainly have advised her to do so.

The distant peal of the door bell was probably that gentleman's arrival. He was punctual. The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to three o'clock.

Eleanor, who had never claimed patience as her strong point, had a sudden urge to put an ear against the drawing room door and listen to what was being said within. Oh, well, she would find out soon enough, no doubt.

"I doubt that Diana will try and take your share, Doctor. We have laws against that sort of thing in this country. It's quite possible, though, that Mrs Cuthbert has left her share to her children, so you will now have new partners."

He nodded morosely. "I am expecting that to be the case."

"Didn't she tell you what she was going to do?" Ann said.

"She told me that she had made a will — as have I — and that I would be taken care of. What she meant by that..." He shrugged and spread his arms wide.

"Forgive me for asking a personal question, but were you fond of her?"

Was it Eleanor's imagination or did his eyes suddenly moisten? The brandy was unlikely to be the cause, she thought. A moment later he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

"I grew to be very fond of her children," he said, dabbing at his face. "There were times when they needed a father's guidance, and I tried to do what I could, without being heavy handed. Irene was strict with them, too strict I thought, but she was a remarkable, far-sighted woman, a woman with vision and verve, and we were to be married."

Ann gulped brandy and coughed as it hit the back of her throat. Eleanor merely raised an eyebrow, while her brain worked furiously. The doctor's announcement put a whole new spin on Irene's murder, and the implications and ramifications rippled onwards and outwards in Eleanor's mind.

Marriage would invalidate any current will and make drawing up a new one essential, especially if Irene intended leaving all her estate to her new husband.

"My sincere condolences, Doctor Bernstein. Whereabouts was the wedding to be?"

"Here in Dulwich, in a quiet ceremony between the two of us."

"Don't the family know, then?" Ann might sound breathless from coughing, but she had her wits about her, Eleanor noted.

"We had not told the children yet, no."

"Why was that?"

"Irene said she wanted to pick the right moment. I was happy to go along with that, and I would prefer that they do not know. Not now. It would only upset them, Diana in particular, and she has a lot on her plate at the moment. I would not wish to add to her burdens."

"You would need witnesses."

"Yes. Irene said that she would ask a couple of the servants on the day."

Eleanor digested this in silence for a moment. Why had Irene and the doctor decided to get married now? Was that significant? There must have been ample opportunity since they'd first met. Were they in love? And had that love taken time to develop and blossom? Or was it more of a business arrangement between the two?

Questions, questions, Eleanor thought sourly, and not the sort she felt comfortable asking, either.

"Perhaps someone didn't want you to get married," Ann said.

"Preposterous! No one knew of our plans."

"How can you be so sure of that? There is such a thing as listening at doorways, you know."

Eleanor nodded. Ann would know, having done enough of that especially when they were at school together. So, too, she remembered, had Diana. She smiled encouragement at Ann, who batted her eyelash-

es — dark lashes in need of none of the clinic's enhancements — at the doctor.

"Someone here could have overheard you."


Long lashes and a pretty woman were not enough to convince him. "I am sure you are wrong. Besides, I cannot see that our marriage would be a reason to kill her, although Irene once said that someone would learn that love and marriage weren't only for the young."

Eleanor was about to pounce on that when the door opened and Diana stood there, holding tight to the jamb as if using it to stay upright. Her pale face sought out the doctor.


"The solicitor is here, Herr Doktor. He is happy to speak to us in the dining room if you would care to join us, please. He has more room there to spread out his papers."

Bernstein got to his feet, bowed to the ladies and hurried to the door. "Tsk, tsk, my dear, are you not well? Of course I will join you."

Eleanor saw him hold Diana by the arm as if lending her support, then the door closed behind them and their voices faded away.



Chapter 15



“Well!” Ann exclaimed when they were alone. “What did you make of all that?” She rose gracefully from her chair and carried her glass across to the drinks cabinet. “Sure you won’t have one?”

“Yes, thanks. I need a clear head to have any chance of sorting out the clues in this case. As to uncovering the killer...” She raised a hand and let it fall.

“What motives have you come up with?”

“Oh, plenty. They’ve all got one, as far as I can see.”

“Including Diana?”

Eleanor’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Yes, even she.”

“Go on, then, what are they?” Ann resumed her seat, curling her legs beneath her as she sat on the armchair.

“Well, Raphael wants to be an artist, not a business man. Persephone wants to be a dancer, not work in a beauty clinic, and Diana wants to run the business in her own way.”

“What about Eugenie? What does she want?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure, there. She is clearly glad to be free of her mother’s control, but whether there is something else, something deeper and more personal, I can’t presently work out. I haven’t had the chance to speak to her alone, yet.”

“She doesn’t want to be an artist or dancer, then?”

"She seems not to. How did she seem when you were with her earlier? Did she say anything?"

Ann shook her dark head. "No, not that I can think of, or nothing out of the ordinary, at least. She mainly talked of the treatments and the products; it was like listening to a saleswoman's talk."

"Well, that was hardly surprising. I'd imagine she would be going through the motions, both physically and verbally, as with any other customer. She'd only have half her mind on her work."

What the other half was occupied with was impossible to know. Had she been mourning her mother, or relishing her freedom, or even celebrating the fact that she had, so far, got away with murder? Who could tell?

Eugenie might not even have been thinking at all. Grief slows you down and fogs your brain, as if some giant engine had been shut down, and could no longer function. Eleanor well knew what that was like — it was only a matter of a few weeks since she'd found herself in a similar position.

"Yes, I suppose that might explain it." Ann took out a cigarette case and offered it to Eleanor. When she had lit both their cigarettes, she said, "I didn't say much to Eugenie. There's only so many times you can offer condolences for a terrible event, without it sounding like you are harping on, or being nosy."

"True, though I wonder what Eugenie is hiding."

"Are you so sure she is?"

Eleanor drew on her cigarette. "Yes. As I said before, I think it's likely. I refuse to believe she is the only person in the household who was happy with their lot."

"And what about Dr Bernstein? He's not likely to have murdered his bride to be, now, is he? He seems to have been genuinely fond of Irene, though goodness knows what he saw in her."

"Oh, that bit's easy."

"Is it? Then maybe I'm stupid." Ann pouted.

"You aren't stupid at all. On the contrary, you have a pure mind, while mine is suspicious and more on the level of a sewer."

"Eew." Ann wrinkled her nose. "Don't say that, darling."

Eleanor laughed. Ann looked so comical with her face all screwed up. "Stop it. You'll need another treatment if you keep doing that. No, the doctor's motive for marrying Irene was probably money, rather than love, I think."

"Ooh! I never thought of that."

"That's why I said you had a pure mind. However, if that is the reason, it removes it as a motive for murder."

"Unless they had already been secretly married."

Eleanor considered the suggestion. "It's possible, and it's something I can check on tomorrow."

"Have you ruled out the servants? And what about the secretary?"

"No, no." Eleanor waved a hand, leaving smoke trails from her cigarette hanging in the air above her chair. "I haven't ruled out or discounted anybody. When you are as disagreeable as the late Mrs Cuthbert, you give every person in the house a reason to get rid of you."

"Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration, darling?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. As to Aubrey Vernon...did you pay Eugenie for the treatments you've had?"

Ann shook her head. "No, she seemed to think the arrangement was that we would settle up with Diana before we left." She frowned. "Why do you ask? We'll obviously do so."

"Yes, of course, but regular customers must have to pay on the spot for their treatments. Do they pay the girls, or Mrs Cuthbert in the office? If there is money in the house, Vernon might have been caught pilfering or embezzling."

"He might, but can you really see it? He's too inoffensive to do anything like that. He wouldn't have the nerve."

Perhaps, but if he was desperate for money...Eleanor pushed the thought to one side. There were others with a more obvious motive

than the secretary. Better to make a mental note to ask Diana about the clinic's cash flow system — and who had access to it — and move on.

"Would you say the same about the soft-footed butler?" Eleanor asked.

"Hmm. He does have the knack of suddenly appearing, doesn't he? He came into the treatment room so quietly I didn't even hear the door. He mumbled apologies when he saw I was there, and disappeared again."

Eleanor thought it odd that the butler would enter a treatment room, especially without knocking.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he didn't, and he does seem rather young for the position. And rather attractive." Ann wagged her eyebrows. "How old would you say he was? Mid-thirties?"

"Yes, about that. Possibly a little less. Once again, though, there is no apparent motive for murdering his employer."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll think of one."

Eleanor's smile was wry. She could think up any number of reasons for murder, but uncovering a real one was a different matter, and that could only be achieved by dint of careful questioning. She spared a thought for Tilly, and hoped the maid was making better progress than she herself appeared to be.

She switched track. "Why did Irene go to the pool early this morning? What drove her down there? Nobody seems to have heard her leave her room, go along the corridor and down the stairs."

"This house is solidly built," Ann said. "There are no creaking floorboards, at least not on our side of the house. Have you noticed? Once people were sound asleep only the clap of doom would wake them. If Irene had lived here all her life —"

"She spent a long time in Egypt, remember."

"Or for many years, anyway, then she could probably move around without making too much noise."

"Yes, that's true. You're not likely to go blundering into the furniture, because you know instinctively where it is."

"Exactly. Maybe she was going to the dashing doctor's room for a bit of...you know."

Eleanor laughed. "Really, Ann. I can't imagine that as the explanation. It's not outside the bounds of possibility, but at that time of the morning, I think it unlikely."

"It's not an image to dwell on, certainly. Are you going to tell Diana about the wedding?"

"I told the doctor that I wouldn't, so no. Not unless I think it necessary." She pushed herself out of her chair. "I'm going outside into the garden."

"Whatever for, darling?"

"I want a closer look at the rear of the property and the doors to the pool room in particular."

"Are you expecting footprints in the flowerbeds? Don't you think the police will have found them?"

Eleanor laughed. "If I do they'll probably only be Persephone's from this morning. Are you coming?"

Ann appeared to shrink into her chair. "Well..."

"You can stay here if you want. I shan't be long, and then I'd like to check the doors from inside the pool room."

"If you can. The police may have it guarded."

In the event, there was nothing to see outdoors — the doors opened onto a piece of hardstanding and there was no way to tell if they had been opened recently — and the pool room was empty.

"It looks as though the police have finished in here," Ann said, when they got there. She had accompanied Eleanor along the corridor with its bizarre painted figures, though not without a shiver and a moue of distaste on her pretty face.

"Yes, for now." It seemed typical of Inspector Logan that he hadn't bothered to leave a constable on duty. The room was a crime scene,

after all, yet here was another example of the man's laxness, but this one played into her hands, so she shouldn't grumble.

The room appeared brighter than it had done that morning. The mid-afternoon sunlight, filtering down through the glass roof, sent different shadows over the pool. The figures on the walls no longer appeared to dance and the air felt warmer than it had done when Eleanor was last there.

She skirted the pool, heading for the rear doors where she bent down and scrutinised the keyhole. No tell-tale scratches marred the brass plate and she stood upright and looked at the hinges — the door opened outwards.

"That's odd."

"What is, darling? What is it you're looking for?"

"Any indication that the doors had been opened. You can tell from the hinges that it opens outwards. There's a slabbed area directly outside, but no handle on the door out there."

"You can only push not pull, you mean?"

"Yes. A curious arrangement."

"So, no one could get in from outside even if they had a key."

"It begins to look like it."

Eleanor turned, looking for the door through to the servants' quarters. It had been easy to spot that morning, for it had been standing open; now it took a moment for her eyes to find it, flanked and camouflaged by two of Raphael's painted pillars.

She again inspected the lock and tried the handle, which did not turn.

"Is it locked from the other side?" Ann asked as Eleanor bent to put her eye to the keyhole.


"It's locked, but there's no key in there, so it's hard to tell."

"Perhaps the police took it."


Eleanor gave an absent shake of the head. Why did this door even need a lock? The servants would have to get in to clean the room and

as long as they did not do so while a customer was using the pool, there was no reason for the door to be locked. Unless Mrs Cuthbert did not trust her staff not to come in and pilfer clients' belongings while the owners were distracted.

"Come on," she said, taking Ann by the arm. "I've seen enough for now. We'd better be getting back before we're missed. I'm hoping to get the family's reaction to the will, once the solicitor has left. I'm expecting ructions, as Tilly would say."



Chapter 16



Despite Eleanor's fears, only an ominous silence met them when they returned to the hall.

Cripps, the butler, was closing the front door as if he'd just seen someone off the property and their appearance surprised him. He straightened his face, thus removing a broad grin, then glided past them with barely a nod.

Ann scowled at his retreating back. "Hmm. He looks very pleased with himself."

"Doesn't he, though. I wonder why?"

"Perhaps he's received a larger legacy than he was expecting. Talk about the cat who got the cream."

Eleanor looked around the now empty hall. The door to the dining room was closed, but that to the drawing room stood wide. She gave a small shrug and strolled into the latter. They may as well be comfortable while they waited for Diana.

"Well," said Ann. She threw herself back into the chair she had not long since vacated. "What do we do now? Please tell me that you know who killed Irene Cuthbert. This place, this family, is beginning to get on my nerves."

"Shhh." Eleanor looked over her shoulder at the open doorway. "No, I don't know who killed her. I'm not a miracle worker, or a mind reader. You don't have to stay if you don't want to, but I'd rather you did."

She spoke more sharply than she had intended and instantly regretted it.

Ann's presence was a soothing balm against the prickly and astringent Cuthberts. Her sharp tongue and sharper wits were needed, because Eleanor had made no progress in uncovering the murderer, and Ann could always be relied to lift her friend's spirits.

"Oh, I shan't run out on you, darling," Ann reached for her cigarette case again. "But this is hardly the fun few days I had in mind."

"That's not your fault."

Eleanor was about to say that they were taking a long time when a door opened, and Raphael's voice reached them clearly.

"You can all go to hell. Keep your bally money. I'm going to the pub and I may not be back."

Footsteps crowded the hall, the front door opened and slammed shut.

Ann's eyebrows almost reached her hairline. "Dear me. If that's the artistic temperament, then you can keep it."

"Persephone, are you all right?" Diana's voice held concern, but also a hint of exhaustion as her youngest sister burst into the drawing room, heading straight for the French windows.

"Yes," she snapped. "I just want to be left alone." With a toss of her head she disappeared into the garden.

More doors slammed, then Diana followed Persephone into the drawing room, but instead of going to the French window, she made straight for the drinks cabinet.

"Sorry," she said, "I know it's past tea time, and I've asked Cripps to bring tea, but in the meantime I feel in need of something a little stronger." She poured a little whisky into a tumbler.

"Is everything all right?" asked Ann.

"Phew!" Diana sat on the couch and sipped her drink before replying. "As you've probably gathered, things are far from all right, but

I'm sure we'll survive the storm." Her smile was forced and, Eleanor thought, a little forlorn.

"I take it the will was a surprise, then?" she said.

"Rather." Diana pushed hair from her forehead with the back of her hand and stared gloomily into her glass.

"Well?" Ann's soft voice held a touch of impatience. "Are you going to tell us what it said? It would help Eleanor's investigation."

"Hmm?" Diana continued to look into her glass, before she swirled the contents around and swallowed them in one gulp. She gagged on the fiery spirit. "Yes, all right. Just give me a moment to remember everything. I need to get it clear in my own mind first."

Eleanor was quite happy to wait, though she had a raging thirst and hoped the butler would not be long in bringing the tea.

"The solicitor said Mother's will was quite complicated, because it involves the business as well as the property as part of her estate. I'll start with the easy bit." She began ticking items off on her fingers. "First: Mother left all the domestic servants one hundred pounds and two hundred to Aubrey. Second: she bequeathed the sum of one thousand pounds to Doctor Bernstein. Third, the remainder of the estate, and that includes the house, is to be divided between me, Eugenie, Raphael and Persephone. Finally, Mother left her share of the business to me alone. Doctor Bernstein still has his own share, of course. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, thank you." Ann leaned forward and put her chin in the heel of her palm. "So, what's the problem?"

Eleanor hid a smile. After hearing Raphael's outburst and the banging of doors, it was obvious that not everybody was happy at the provisions of Mrs Cuthbert's last will and testament.

Diana sighed and rubbed a fingertip up and down on the bridge of her nose. "Because none of the others will receive their inheritance until their twenty-fifth birthday."

Ann gasped and Eleanor's eyes widened. The two friends exchanged a glance.

"I can't understand it," Diana said. "I suppose when Mother made the will she assumed she'd go on for a long time yet." She looked at Eleanor and it seemed her tired eyes were desperate for reassurance. "People do think that, don't they?"

"Of course," said Eleanor, softly, "we all hope for a long life."

Personally, it seemed like the last unkind act of a vindictive woman, though why Irene should hate her children so much was a mystery.

"How long will they have to wait?" asked Ann.

"Persephone is the worst affected. She's only eighteen, so she won't receive anything for seven years. In Raphael's case it's just over three. Eugenie doesn't have too long to wait, only a year and a half." Diana sighed. "She alone seems to have accepted the situation and has said she's happy to go on working at the clinic. As for the other two, your guess is as good as mine."

"Are there a substantial amount of assets above and beyond the house?"

Eleanor wondered just how much Irene had been worth, and if whoever killed her was now gnashing their teeth in fury. Any of her children who expected to be instantly rich would have suffered a cruel disappointment.

"According to the solicitor, Mother had a little over twelve thousand pounds in disposable income."

Ann pursed her lips in a silent whistle. "She was quite a wealthy woman, then."

"Yes. Most of it came from my father who owned a successful shipping company."

A tap came on the door and Cripps arrived with the tea trolley, bringing the conversation to a halt. Eleanor didn't mind. She appeared to be the only person in the house who had not imbibed alcohol that

day and her throat was parched. It also gave her the chance to take stock of all she'd been told and try and make sense of it.

She drank the first cup that Diana poured straight off and poured herself another when Diana excused herself and said she must check on Persephone.

"Has that helped?" Ann whispered.

"Yes, thanks, I was very thirsty."

"No, silly. I meant hearing about the will."

Eleanor's lips curved in a playful smile — she had known what Ann meant, but couldn't resist teasing. "I don't know, yet. It has certainly put the cat among the pigeons if money was the motive. It does confirm my earlier thinking, though."

"Which was?"

"That the doctor, if marriage to Irene was really on the cards, had no motive to murder her now."

"Unless they'd had a row and she was threatening to cut him out of her will altogether."

Eleanor put her cup and saucer back on the trolley and considered the suggestion. The idea of Doctor Bernstein as a murderer did not sit well with her. There was something about those twinkling eyes and his sharp intelligence that she found appealing.

He had flared up at lunchtime when Raphael had spoken out of turn, yet had seemed placid enough when Irene had berated him about face cream at dinner the previous evening. Perhaps he had bottled up his anger and waited until they were alone. Then, when he had lashed out, the result had been murder.

Eleanor shook her head. No, this crime had been premeditated, it was not the result of a moment's madness, she was sure of that. Besides, the doctor's sadness at Irene's death seemed genuine enough. She sensed that it had not been feigned.

"He would still have had his share of the business, don't forget, and somehow I can't see Bernstein committing murder. Can you?"

Ann wrinkled her nose. "No, perhaps not. So, have you eliminated him, then?"

"Almost." Eleanor refused to confirm or deny her suspicions and conclusions. "I still have to speak to Eugenie." She looked at her hands. "Perhaps she will be prepared to give me a manicure."

"Well, while you are doing that, I'm going to pop out and see how Diana's getting on with Persephone. Not getting her mother's money for seven years is a wait of biblical proportions. No wonder the poor girl was so upset."

Yes, Eleanor thought, nibbling at a fingernail, especially if she had committed murder in order to get her inheritance sooner.



Chapter 17



It took a while before Eleanor located the middle sister. The dining room was clear, the table already laid for dinner that evening, and all the treatment rooms were empty. It was mere chance that she heard Eugenie's voice coming from the office by the front door.

She supposed that a professional detective like Inspector Logan, or Chief Inspector Blount of Scotland Yard, would have walked straight in without knocking, yet her upbringing and sense of decorum would not let her do that. She had done so before only because she thought Vernon was on his own. Now that someone was with him, her hand hovered over the handle for a moment before she raised it in a fist and tapped lightly on the door. Then she entered.

"Oh, it's you." Aubrey Vernon looked up in surprise. His desk was scattered with papers and he was poised, pen in hand, over the diary Eleanor had been shown that morning. Eugenie stood at his elbow. "What can I do for you, my lady?" he said.

Eugenie patted him on the shoulder. "I don't think you can, Aubrey, darling. I rather suspect that it's me that Lady Eleanor is looking for."

"Yes, would you mind?" Eleanor held up the finger with the ragged nail. "I appreciate that this is hardly the best time, but —"

Her lame excuse of not having a nail file with her wasn't needed. Eugenie gave a quick nod and came around the desk to her.

"Yes, I can manage a manicure. It will fill the time before I have to face my whining family again. Come on." She walked past Eleanor to the door. "Thanks for the list of names, Aubrey, and I'm sorry I can't tell you where Rapha has gone, only that he said he was going to the pub, and that usually means *The Crown*. I shouldn't worry, he'll be back soon enough. See you tomorrow."

Wondering why the secretary wanted to know Raphael's whereabouts, Eleanor followed Eugenie into the hall and along the corridor to a treatment room.

"Take a seat," Eugenie instructed, as she pulled forward a small table, and drew up another chair.

"Thank you. Do you always use the same room?"

"Yes, we all have our own rooms. It's easier that way."

She did not explain how, and Eleanor sat down and put her palms flat on the table. She stared across at the young woman opposite who did not meet her gaze, but busied herself with a tray of instruments she took from a drawer.

Eugenie's movements were slow and deliberate as she sorted the tools — files, tweezers, round-ended cuticle pushers — to the side of the tray closest to her.

Eleanor waited, saying nothing more, wondering how best to approach her. Like her siblings, she seemed unmarked by tragedy. Here were no trembling lips, no tear-stained cheeks, no red-rimmed eyes. On the contrary, whatever she may have felt about her mother's death, Eugenie had her emotions under control. She might have been made of marble for all the effect the murder appeared to have had on her.

She picked up Eleanor's hand, selected a file, and got to work.

"Will Raphael be all right, do you think?" Eleanor asked. "He'd already had plenty to drink before he said he was going to the pub."

Eugenie shrugged. "Oh, I should think so. He may have flounced out — it's the artistic temperament, that's all — but he could always hold

his liquor. Besides, the landlord of the Crown has a pretty daughter that Raphael has taken a fancy to."

"Oh, he's courting is he?"

"He will be, now that Mother isn't around to stop him and to criticise him for doing so."

"What about the rest of you? Were you allowed to have boyfriends?"

Eugenie gave Eleanor a brief, piercing stare before her dark lashes fell again. "Hardly. We never went anywhere we were likely to meet anyone. There aren't that many eligible young men left since the war."

Eligible? It seemed an old-fashioned idea, though Eleanor knew that the war, and the flu epidemic which had followed it, had claimed too many young lives. There would be plenty of spinsters in her generation, herself amongst them, most probably, but the Cuthbert sisters were young, attractive, and reasonably well off. It shouldn't take too much effort for them to find husbands.

"Anyway," Eugenie said, "I shouldn't worry about Raphael. Once the fact that he's free has finally sunk in, and he realises he can become the artist he always wanted to be, he'll be as happy as Larry. We could put some of his works on show, here at the clinic. I'm sure they'd sell well."

Eleanor ignored Raphael's temperament and commercial prospects and focused on the word that both Diana and Persephone had used.

"Free? Is that how you all feel?"

Eugenie did not look up from her task. "I can't speak for the others, but I would think so. I certainly do."

"Your mother must have been a difficult woman."

"I'll say." She blew on Eleanor's finger tips, then picked up her other hand.

"Why was that, do you think?"

"Raphael said you asked an awful lot of questions. Why are you so interested in mother's death?"

"Because it was murder, and I want to know who killed her. Don't you?"

Eugenie lifted her head and stared straight at Eleanor. "Frankly, I don't care. I doubt it was anyone here."

This idea that the murderer was an outsider was tiresome. Were all the Cuthberts determined to deny the truth?

"But the house was all locked up."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. Cripps may not have locked the French window last night. We were all in the drawing room until quite late, remember, talking and playing music. He's probably too scared to admit it, though I'm surprised that Inspector Logan hasn't got it out of him."

If this was true it put a whole new complexion on the case. Eleanor didn't fancy asking the butler straight out if he had failed to lock up, but perhaps she could ask Tilly to do so.

She turned her attention back to what Eugenie had said earlier. "I'm surprised that you all talk about freedom in relation to your mother's death. Why do you feel like that?"

Eugenie threw the file back on the tray. "All right, I'll tell you. It's because mother had no love for, and no time for, her own children. Having given birth to the four of us, with barely a breathing space between confinements, she waited until father had died and we were all in school, before clearing off to Egypt."

She picked up the orange stick, bent her head again and started to work on Eleanor's cuticles. Despite the anger in Eugenie's voice her touch was gentle.

"Mother spent years out there, sending presents home for birthdays, and for Christmas when she remembered, but it was if we were out of sight and out of mind. She simply didn't care for us. When she did finally come home, dragging Emanuel Bernstein with her, everything changed for us."

"Oh? In what way?"

"She began to control our lives and we'd never expected that. We'd had freedom up until then, you see, although we never realised it at the time. Now we were all to do what mother desired, and when we were old enough, she put us to work. I think we are all glad she's gone."

Eleanor pondered this damning speech and wondered how true it was. She would have to ask Doctor Bernstein how Irene felt about her children. He had merely said she was too strict with them, but so far, she only had their perspective of the relationship. She felt it too one-sided to get an accurate picture.

"You make the Cuthbert Clinic sound like a Victorian workhouse," she said. "Surely, it's not as bad as that."

"Well, I don't mind it. I enjoy the work and I think Diana will run the place better, but it's been hard for Raphael and Persephone."

She finished her ministrations, put her tools down, and picked up both of Eleanor's hands again. "Would you like polish on your nails?" she asked, as she inspected her handiwork. "We've some lovely new colours you may like." She reached into a drawer on her side of the table. "Here's one. It's called Cairo Crimson."

She held out a bottle of varnish in a virulent shade of pink rather than red, and Eleanor winced.

"No, thanks, that's a bit too loud and wild for me. It's more in Lady Ann's line. I think I'll leave them without, thanks."

"Very well." Eugenie leaned forward and peered at Eleanor's face. This disconcerting action was not the prelude to a warning to stay out of the Cuthberts' affairs — as Eleanor first thought — but merely Eugenie doing what she was trained to do.

"Do you drink and smoke?"

"Sometimes," Eleanor admitted. Most people did these days, including women, although in Eleanor's case, she did so more to fit in with her contemporaries than because she enjoyed either activity.

"Well, make sure it is only sometimes, or better still, not at all. Both activities are bad for the skin and will age you before you know it." Eugenie put a finger tip against Eleanor's lower eyelid and pressed.

"Actually, your skin is quite elastic."

"Is that good?"

"Very good, and it's nice to see no dark circles under your eyes. I warned Lady Ann about that."

Eleanor laughed. "Are you, too, going to tell me to drink a glass of water before I retire?"

"Yes, and try to get a good eight hour's sleep a night. No doubt Diana's already told you that."

Eleanor leaned back, away from Eugenie's gently prodding finger. It was unnerving to have her face and skin scrutinised in that way. No doubt she was being offered good advice, and if she had been a regular customer at the clinic then she would have appreciated it. As it was, she couldn't help thinking that it was a deliberate attempt at distraction.

"Will Raphael and Persephone leave now? Will you?"

"Leave? Where would we go? This is our home. We cannot afford to leave. None of us is rich like you. We have to work for our living."

Eleanor ignored the reference to her own financial status as another attempt to divert her.

Irene Cuthbert had talked of reducing Eugenie's and Raphael's allowance. Had that allowance ceased with her death? Eleanor presumed that it must have done, so how, then, were the family to live?

"Isn't that what your mother intended? If the allowance she gave you all stops with her death, then it is in your own interests to keep the Clinic as a profitable business."

Eugenie shrugged. "Diana said she'd pay us a wage until we're each of an age for the legacies to be paid. According to Raphael, this place makes a lot of money, so it shouldn't be too difficult to pay us out of that income." She lifted her sharp little chin. "We'll survive, I'm sure."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." Eleanor smiled at the young woman who was beginning to pack away her tools. "Did you hear your mother get up in the night?"

"No, I didn't, but then I'm a fairly sound sleeper as a rule."

"Have you any idea why she might have gone downstairs to the pool room?"

Eugenie shook her head. She did not look at Eleanor, but got up and went to a small wash basin in the corner. "None at all, though she may have heard someone getting into the house through the French window." She wetted a cloth and brought it back to wipe down the table. "It's quite a mystery."

"Was your mother a sound sleeper, too?"

Eugenie's smile barely curved her thin lips. "It must be a Cuthbert trait. Right, are we done here?"

Eleanor admitted that they were, but felt dissatisfied as she preceded Eugenie out of the room. She had made some progress in her investigation despite the family giving her the run around — Raphael and Eugenie in particular — and now needed time to assimilate all she'd learned, and sieve through it looking for clues.

Irene Cuthbert's death was as big a mystery as ever. It was time to catch up with Tilly and find out what she'd learned. Perhaps she'd had better luck than her mistress in uncovering clues.

Eleanor devoutly hoped so.



Chapter 18



Lady Ann was on her own in the drawing room thumbing through a magazine when Eleanor returned.

“You found Eugenie, then? What did you have done?”

“Only the manicure, and before you ask, I learnt very little and still don’t know the murderer’s identity.”

Ann wrinkled her nose. “Poor you. Chin up. Like I said, I have every confidence that you’ll get there.” She patted the arm of the chair beside her own, inviting Eleanor to sit down. “I know you, Eleanor Bakewell. Once you get your teeth into something, you won’t give up.”

That was all well and good, but Eleanor felt much less sanguine about her prospects of solving the case than Ann did. She had spoken to her five main suspects, discovered that they all had a motive — though Doctor Bernstein’s was a trifle weak — and all had the opportunity to commit the murder.

What still baffled her was the means by which Irene had been lured to her death. Why had she, a sound sleeper according to Eugenie, woken in the early hours and gone downstairs? It made no sense. The idea that she had been disturbed by the opening of a downstairs window was risible. Eleanor didn’t believe it for a moment. Why had Eugenie suggested it?

“Well, I can’t figure it out,” she said. “Perhaps if I sleep on the problem it will help, though if I’m none the wiser in the morning, I may call it quits.”

Ann raised an eyebrow. "I'll believe that when I see it."

"I'm hoping Tilly has had better luck below stairs. I'll go and check with her and see you at dinner time."

She waved her fingers at Ann and went back into the hall where Cripps was just opening the door to Raphael.

"Sorry, I forgot to take my key."

The prodigal shot past her without a glance and carried on up the stairs. With some amusement she saw him drop a kiss onto the head of Nefertiti before continuing upwards.

"Oh, Cripps," she said, as the butler neared the door to the servants' quarters. "Would you ask my maid to attend me, please?"

"Certainly, my lady."

A short time later two double taps sounded on Eleanor's bedroom door. She opened it and smiled at the welcome sight of her maid.

"Come in, Tilly. Have you anything to report?"

"Quite a lot, as it happens."

"Good, then take a seat." Eleanor pointed to a round seated boudoir chair, while she herself sat on the edge of the bed. "How are things downstairs?"

Tilly's snub little nose wrinkled. "Not so good." She sniffed. "I feel very sorry for the maids. There are only the two, Edna Simpson, known as Edie —"

"That's the poor girl who helped drag Mrs Cuthbert from the pool?"

"Yes. The other one is Abigail Wright. She's known as Abi. Then there's the cook, Mrs Barker, and Cripps the butler, both of whom you know about. There's also a scullery maid, Gladys -"

"Known as Glad, I take it?"

"Of course, though she's anything but." She gave a rueful smile. "That's about it for regular staff, although there are a couple of cleaning women who come in twice a week on Mondays and Fridays."

"It doesn't sound many for a house of this size."

"It isn't. The Cuthbert daughters are supposed to keep the treatment rooms and their own bedrooms clean, but those poor maids are run off their feet."

"Oh dear, Tilly. Do I run you off your feet?"

Her maid's job included keeping the apartment at Bellevue Mansions clean, shopping for food, and preparing Eleanor's meals when her mistress was at home. She was also responsible for laundering and the care of their clothes, and would make minor repairs when necessary. In the winter she made frequent visits to the cellar to fill a scuttle with coal for the drawing room fire. The Mansions at least had a dumb waiter, so she was saved the long trek up the stairs with a heavy load, and Tilly had the sense to make sure she had enough coal left in the scullery each night to light the fire early every morning.

However, she received a good wage, and had plenty of time off, including two evenings a week which, being an avid film-goer, she spent in the local picture palace. She would have gone to the ends of the Earth for Eleanor and did not consider herself hard done by.

"I like to keep busy, my lady," she murmured, and bent her head with its halo of light brown hair, looking down at her careworn hands.

"Is it a happy servants' hall, would you say?"

"Not at the moment, but that isn't entirely surprising, is it? What with their mistress murdered and the police swarming all over the shop. Still, in general, I think they probably rub along together, all right. Mrs Barker seems to think that Cripps has ideas above his station, from what I can gather. He doesn't say much and appears content to leave the running of the kitchen to her. It's her domain."

"Oh, agreed." Eleanor had been shooed out of the kitchen at Bellevue Mansions on more than one occasion. She was always happy to fend for herself and make a cup of tea or coffee, or even cook something, but Tilly always insisted on seeing to it and showing her the door.

"What have they had to say about Mrs Cuthbert?" she asked. "Did they like her?"

Tilly's sniff spoke volumes. "I don't think she was particularly popular." She shrugged. "Many mistresses aren't, but the servants here don't want to speak ill of the dead, and Edie in particular is quite cut up over her death."

"If you'd seen her as I did, sopping wet, freezing cold, and half-drowned herself, you'd know the reason why. Was it Edie that found her?"

"Yes. She says she ran back into the kitchen screaming, and she and Cripps went back to try and get her out.

"Yes, I know, I saw that bit."

Tilly's eyes glinted and she leaned forward. "Ah, but it's more than that, my lady. Edie blames herself for her mistress's death."

"What?" Eleanor's eyebrows rose. "What motive did that poor child have for murder?"

"None at all, but that doesn't stop her feeling guilty. It's her responsibility to see to the fire that heats the pool."

"Ah, go on, Tilly. I'm all ears."

Tilly had discovered that it was Edie's job to lay and light the fire every morning at around four o'clock and to tend it throughout the day, until six in the evening, when it was allowed to go out.

"Mrs Cuthbert said it was too expensive to keep the water heated around the clock. It was also too expensive to heat it from scratch, but doing it the way they did had proved to be the most efficient for the money and the water never went completely cold."

Eleanor nodded. "Diana remarked on the cost of the coal and logs when Ann and I were being shown around. It does seem rather an extravagance if the pool isn't used that much."

"There's a large tank in the basement, so Edie said, with a pump that sends the heated water through the pipes and into the pool. She's

not sure exactly how it works, but there's a man comes every two months or so, to service the system."

"Yes, yes, go on."

"Well, on Tuesday morning, she overslept and failed to wake up until Mr Cripps woke her at six, so the fire hadn't been lit. When she realised the time she went into the pool room to test the temperature of the water. She'd need to build up the fire more than usual, if the water was too cold."

"Understood."

"What's more, she says that the temperature of the water, and the air in the room surrounding the pool, was so cold that she thinks that the rear doors must have been open all night."

"Yet Cripps said that he found the place locked up as normal. That's strange."

"Yes, well, it's Mr Cripps' job to go around last thing at night making sure that the house is secure. He's not likely to admit that he forgot if the owner is murdered as a result."

Eleanor grimaced and shook her head. Someone else that day had put forward the same argument. "Isn't he? If he's maintaining that he secured the house on Monday night, then the killer has to have been a member of the household. Whereas, if a door was left open, the killer could have come from outside and Cripps, and everyone else, is off the hook."

"I hadn't thought of that. You're right."

"Hmm." Eleanor got off the bed and walked to the window. She was thinking hard as she put her head down to smell the roses in the vase on the window ledge.

Eugenie had said the butler had forgotten to lock the French windows, not the doors at the rear of the pool. Had she been telling the truth? If not, why had she lied?

She turned around and leant against the ledge, arms crossed over her chest.

"Let's go back to Edie, for a moment. Did she say anything about feeling groggy when Cripps woke her, yesterday?"

"I don't think so, my lady. I could ask her if you'd like."

"Would you? Discreetly, of course. I'm just wondering whether she had been drugged or given a sleeping draught, which is why she didn't wake at her usual time."

"That's possible, but if so, only one of the other servants could have given it to her. The cook makes them some hot milk or cocoa last thing before they all retire."

"So, she could have been drugged. Will you check if they had hot drinks last night, and let me know in the morning?"

"Certainly, my lady."

"And if they are offered tonight —"

"Don't worry. I shall say I don't want one."

"All right, Tilly. Good work, by the way, old thing."

"Does it help, though?"

Eleanor nodded and sat down again on the bed. "Yes, I think so. It's given me an inkling. I'm beginning to see now how this was done. Before you told me about heating the pool, I was in the dark on why Irene went downstairs."

The more Eleanor thought about it, the more convinced she was that they had hit on the reason for Irene's nocturnal visit to the pool, but who had woken her with the bad news? Who had accompanied her to the pool, smacked her on the back of the neck and let her drown? "I'm still struggling to uncover the why or the who, though," she said.

Tilly brushed her mistress's doubts aside in the same way that Ann had done earlier. "Give yourself a chance, my lady. It's only been a few hours. You'll work it out. You always do."

As far as Eleanor was concerned, solving one, two, or even three cases, didn't mean she could solve them all. "I hope so, Tilly. I don't want to let Diana down. My worry is that she might have done it herself."

"Is that likely?"

Eleanor shrugged. "I honestly don't know. She probably stands to gain the most. For a start, she's the only one of the family who comes into her inheritance immediately."

Tilly sniffed after Eleanor related the terms of Irene Cuthbert's will. "That hardly seems fair, withholding their money like that. It seems spiteful, to me."

Yes, spiteful was a good way to describe Irene, though why anyone should be full of spite against one's own children was beyond Eleanor. Perhaps she had found childbirth very painful and resented them for inflicting it upon her.

Whatever the reason, someone had taken a terrible revenge on her.

"I suppose the police spoke to everyone downstairs?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. Inspector Logan was particularly hard on poor Edie, I thought. I suppose that's because she was the one who found Mrs Cuthbert."

"He didn't arrest her, though?"

Tilly shook her head, and light brown curls danced. "No, he didn't arrest anyone. He kept asking everyone where they were at around two o'clock this morning."

"Two o'clock? Surely they'd all be in their beds. It's far too early for even the servants to be up and about."

Tilly threw her mistress a dark look. "Yes, no one would be stirring by then. Edie, we know, was usually up at four and the cook and the other maids would be up and about around five, probably. It depends on what time those above stairs wanted breakfast, or if they had tea or coffee served to them in bed. I get the impression that Mrs Cuthbert didn't go in much for that. She thought it an indulgence, according to the cook, but she was a stickler for regular mealtimes."

"Yes," said Eleanor, who'd suddenly remembered Aubrey Vernon saying that Irene was always in the office by eight. "Irene was an early riser, but even she wouldn't normally be awake that early."

"Perhaps it was a conspiracy between the servants." Tilly paused and frowned. "No, I can't see that."

Eleanor remembered Edie's distraught state and hastened to agree. "Neither can I, not if it included Edie. Hmm..." She ran a forefinger across her lower lip.

"Yes?" Tilly prompted when her mistress fell silent.

"I've been thinking about the murder weapon and whatever could have caused that bruise on the back of her neck. What if it was one of the logs that Edie would have used for the fire?"

Tilly chuckled. "That's probably a better idea than Inspector Logan's. He tried to get cook to confess and say it was her rolling pin."

"Oh?" Eleanor smothered a grin. "It's not just you that uses them as a weapon, then?"

Tilly had once defended her mistress by walloping her pin across the knees of a man holding Eleanor at gunpoint. It was a memory that Eleanor treasured.

"Well, I don't think Mrs Barker does. She was furious at the suggestion."

Eleanor nodded, but her thoughts had already moved on. A small log, perhaps the shape and size of a woman's arm, would be enough to knock Irene unconscious then, if she hadn't fallen into the water, she could be rolled quietly into the pool...and held down until she drowned.

It was what she'd suggested to Inspector Logan, and he'd agreed that the murder had likely been committed that way.

It also meant that the murder could be committed in silence, and even if any servants were moving about in the kitchen, or their quarters, no one would hear.

Tilly offered to ask Edie about the door leading into the pool room and to discover where the key was kept. She would report back in the morning.

"Thank you."


They wished each other a good evening and parted.

A short time later, Eleanor went back downstairs and joined Ann and Diana in the drawing room.


Raphael returned in time for dinner, which was a quiet affair. Everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts, and the conversation was desultory at best. The banter between Raphael and his sisters, so obvious at lunchtime, was muted, though both he and Eugenie showed a good appetite for the excellent food supplied by Mrs Barker.

Eleanor went to bed early and spent some time lying in the darkness, going over the various conversations she'd had that day, trying to tease what clues she could from what she'd heard.

Then she turned over and fell into a dreamless sleep.



Chapter 19



Early next morning, Eleanor threw her silk dressing gown around her and peered out into the corridor. There were none of the alarums of yesterday, so she grabbed her quilted satin toiletries bag and padded along to the bathroom.

She desperately wanted to be home in her comfortable apartment in Piccadilly, where the water gushed hot from the tap and didn't dribble out barely lukewarm as it did in Cuthbert House, and Tilly would be on hand with a cup of aromatic coffee made just the way she liked it.

With a head still full of sleep she did her ablutions and cleaned her teeth using a brush and a small amount of tooth powder. Her reflection stared back at her as she squinted into the mirror, inspecting her skin for the fine lines and wrinkles that Eugenie and Diana had promised if she didn't drink a glass of water before bedtime.

Satisfied that she looked no different from the day before, she gave the woman in the glass a wry smile and a wink, and went to get dressed.

Sleep and the night had not miraculously supplied the name of Irene Cuthbert's murderer and it was with a heavy heart and a growing sense of frustration that she descended the stairs to breakfast.

Only Diana and Eugenie were in the dining room and she wished them both a good morning.

"Good morning, Eleanor. Did you sleep well?" Diana smiled at her over the rim of her cup.

"Yes, thank you, I did."

"Well, help yourself to whatever you'd like." She waved a hand at the chafing dishes on the sideboard. "The coffee pot is on the table, as is tea, if you'd prefer it."

Suddenly ravenous, Eleanor loaded a plate with two slices of bacon, a spoonful of scrambled egg and a slice of toast before she carried it back to the table.

One by one the others joined them.

Persephone was quiet, Ann restrained and with a tight smile for everyone, Raphael hungover, and Doctor Bernstein sombre.

Eugenie flitted around offering everyone coffee before carrying the pot away to get it refilled.

Surprised that Eugenie should be playing waitress, Eleanor and Ann exchanged a glance. Even the family seemed to think it odd behaviour.

"She's being remarkably helpful this morning," Diana remarked.

"I'm not sure she slept," said Persephone. "I'm sure I heard her running down the corridor all night."

"I didn't." Raphael buttered a slice of toast. "I didn't hear a thing."

"That's because you had too much to drink." Diana scowled at him. "I hope you aren't going to make it a habit."

A hammering on the front door interrupted what might have become a full-blown argument, and a moment or two later Cripps announced the arrival of Inspector Logan and Sergeant Harris.

"They'd like to speak to everyone again, Miss Diana, so I've shown them into the drawing room. There is also a telephone call for Lady Eleanor."

"Oh?" Eleanor's first reaction was surprise, though this was followed by a familiar half-hopeful, half-sinking feeling.

"Yes, a gentleman, my lady. You can take it on the extension in the hall if you will."

Eleanor got up, drained her coffee cup, and followed him out of the dining room, along with Diana who grabbed her friend's arm.

"I'd like to speak to you later."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, all right."

Cripps pointed out a small alcove containing a stool and a telephone. Someone had threaded string through a directory and hung it from a nail attached to the wooden panelling that lined the small space.

Eleanor waited until the butler had moved out of earshot before picking up the receiver.

"Lady Eleanor Bakewell speaking."

"Good morning, my lady," said a well-known voice. "I have some information that may be of help to you. There's a pavilion in a small park not far from where you are. Go to the top of the road and turn left. Can you make it by ten o'clock?"

Her hand tightened on the receiver. "Half-past."

"Very well. I'll see you there."

With extreme care, because she felt like throwing the instrument at the wall, she replaced it on its stand. About to step out of the alcove, she stopped at the sound of a kiss, followed by furious whispering.

"You damned fool. You'll get us arrested."

Someone mumbled an answer that Eleanor failed to catch.

"You should...door...inside." The words ebbed and flowed. Then sharp and clear: "Do it! Do it now!"

A further rumble, then the tap of heels on the tiled floor.

Eleanor's attempt to catch sight of the speakers was thwarted by her skirt getting caught up on the nail behind her. By the time she was free the hallway was empty.

"Drat, and double drat!"

Her anger was more at the assumption of a certain Major Peter Armitage of British Military Intelligence — the man on the telephone — than on the fact that she had failed to discover the identity of the couple in the hall. Armitage had the exasperating habit of popping up in the middle of her investigations and expecting her to do something for him.

This time, she vowed as she strolled back into the dining room, things would be different.

"You didn't finish your toast." Ann held a coffee cup in both hands. "Who was on the phone?"

"I'd had enough, thanks, and it was no one you know, but I shall have to go out soon. Is Diana still with the police?"

"No, darling, I'm here. Inspector Logan wants to speak to Doctor Bernstein and then you, Raphael."

"Me?" Raphael looked innocent, as Bernstein lumbered to his feet, muttered an imprecation in German, and went out.

"Yes, you. Make sure you don't go missing. I want to speak to you myself after you've had words with the police." She turned to Eleanor. "Did I hear you say you were going out?"

"Yes, in about half an hour or so."

"Come on, then. We can talk in one of the treatment rooms."

She whisked away and Eleanor, with a wink at Ann, followed.

"How are you getting on?" Diana demanded in a soft voice after making sure the door was firmly closed behind her.

"Well, I know why your mother went downstairs yesterday, but I still don't know who killed her. Or why. It may not have been for her money."

"But it's someone in the house, yes?"

Diana's entwined hands moved constantly and her worried eyes seemed to implore Eleanor to say, 'no'.

"I'm sorry, Diana. It has to be. If the house was locked up..."

She waited, wondering what her friend would say to that. Would she jump on it as a way out of the family's involvement in the crime?

"Oh, dear. It doesn't look good for Raphael does it, but maybe it was Doctor Bernstein."

Eleanor shook her head, once more refusing to say anything until she was sure. "I understand your mother was a sound sleeper."

"Usually, yes. She kept a small alarm clock on the bedside table, because she was always an early riser, and did not want to oversleep."

"What about you? Are you sure you heard nothing in the early hours in the corridor outside your bedroom?"

"Nothing. Honestly, Eleanor, I slept through until Abigail came to wake me."

Eleanor left it there, asked Diana if she would send Tilly to her, and went upstairs.

On hearing of the phone call, Tilly's sniff perfectly summed up her feelings for the major. She disliked and distrusted him in equal measure, fearing that he used her mistress, and Eleanor's remarkable intelligence, in place of his own.

There was certainly something dark and dangerous about Peter Armitage, and Eleanor would be the first to admit it. What she would not admit, to anyone other than herself, was how dull and dreary her life seemed when compared to her wartime exploits under the major's command. She felt more alive with him than with any man she'd ever met. He was like a drug to her system and very hard to give up.

"I'll see what he wants, but don't worry. I have every intention of sending him away with a flea in his ear."

Tilly nodded, but was wise enough to make no comment.

"Now, then, anything to add to what you told me yesterday?"

"Yes, a few things. You were right about Edie's hot milk being doctored. She says she did feel groggy yesterday, though she put it down to oversleeping. Everyone else just said they had a good night's sleep. I also checked on that door between kitchen and pool room. It's lined on the inside, so I doubt anyone would have heard murder being done on the far side. I tested it by going through, closing the door, and yelling inside the pool room, but when I went back to the kitchen, no one turned a hair."

Eleanor suppressed a grin at the thoroughness of Tilly's methods and the thought of her standing alone in the pool room and screaming.

"Did the cook make a milky drink for everyone last night?"

"No, but everything was at sixes and sevens yesterday. I think the emotional strain must have been all too much for them. Both Edie and Abi fell asleep as soon as they were in bed, although one of them – Edie I assumed – did toss and turn for a bit."

"The sign of a guilty conscience, perhaps?"

"I don't think so, my lady. Not to murder anyway, she doesn't seem the type. Besides, in the normal run of things, Edie didn't have much to do with Mrs Cuthbert."

"Except at meal times."

"But she doesn't wait at table. She only helps bring the food through from the kitchen and takes the used plates and things back there. Mr Cripps and Abigail do the actual serving. At least, that's what she told me."

With a sigh, Eleanor realised that she hadn't really noticed who had served her meals. Her attention had been on those sitting at the table, not on the staff who walked around it, or hovered at her elbow.

"Oh dear. I'm not very observant, am I?"

Tilly grinned. "You're not so bad. Better than most, I'd say. At least you remember your P's and Q's, and don't talk down to servants – unlike some as I could mention."

"Oh?"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to mention any names. Anyway, all that aside, I can't see Edie Simpson murdering her employer."

"Hmm, I don't think so either." Eleanor tapped her fingers on the window ledge and stared out as she had done on the morning Irene had died. Some memory of that morning lurked in the back of her mind, and she had the sudden feeling that it was vitally important. What was it?

"All right, old girl, thank you. I'll catch up with you after my talk with the major."

"Very well, my lady." Tilly's face softened. "Please be careful."

Eleanor laughed. "Well, of course, my dear. Aren't I always?"



Chapter 20



Once Tilly had gone Eleanor took her parasol, strolled downstairs, and let herself quietly out of the front door. It was a pleasant day for a walk, the air felt warm against her forehead and cheek, and the trees along the avenue to the main road were in full leaf.

The major's directions to their rendezvous point were simple enough, though she considered he had a nerve to contact her the way he had, in the middle of an investigation. The thought brought a smile to her lips, for Major Peter Armitage had nerves of steel.

Theirs was a long and complex relationship going back to the war.

Because of her language skills — Eleanor spoke fluent French — she had volunteered, under the name of Ella Rowsley, to join military intelligence for a mission behind enemy lines in France.

Armitage had been the leader of the small team that crossed the Channel in the dead of night. In situations that were often a matter of life and death, she had learned to obey his orders, instantly and without question. With the mission successfully accomplished, the team had split up and made their separate ways to the coast. It was during this time that Eleanor and the major had, albeit briefly, become lovers.

Sometimes, now, Eleanor was unable to decide whether she loved him, or loathed him, but what she could not deny was the strong physical attraction that still existed between them, the frisson of excitement when he was near, or the way she came alive at his touch.

While these memories scurried around in her head, she walked at a brisk pace, the tip of her parasol tapping the ground, and soon came to a set of iron railings that surrounded the park. On entering, she followed the paved path, her eyes scanning to left and right, enjoying the planted beds and the birdsong.

No one was about, but away to the right stood a covered pavilion and a small bandstand. She made her way towards them, humming an old French tune, and hoped that Armitage wasn't wasting her time.

He was there, leaning forward on a wooden bench, his forearms resting on his thighs, his hands clasped between his knees. She noted his dark hair that sprang up from his brow and curled around his ears, his dark haunting eyes, his strong jaw, and the scar on the side of his chin. For a moment her heart lightened. It was good to see him, though she had no intention of letting him know that.

"Thank you for coming, my lady." He got to his feet.

Eleanor nodded, but did not offer her hand. She sensed that if she did, she would be pulled into his embrace and, while part of her yearned for that to happen, the larger part – the better part, she told herself – needed to maintain some semblance of dignity and equanimity. She kept her distance and sat down on the other end of the bench. Even at this remove she could feel the magnetic attraction of the man. It crackled and fizzed in the air between them like static electricity.

Eleanor let her gaze travel across the sunlit park. The shadow of the bandstand with its ornate finial looked like one of Tilly's little round cakes with a cherry on top. That thought reminded her of all the little cafes and tea shops that were the usual venues for assignations with the major. Perhaps there wasn't one in Dulwich and the park had been the best alternative. Or perhaps there was another reason.

"I am delighted to see you alive and well, Major, but what's all this about? You intimated that you had some information germane to the murder at Cuthbert House."

His lips twitched at her reference to his disappearance and misreported death a month earlier, but all he said was, "Yes, I do."

"And what might that be?"

"Not so fast, my lady. I also have an interest in that place. I thought we might pool our resources."

Eleanor knew what that meant. The major never cooperated, but he would pick her brains and use her for his own purpose. Inspector Logan had employed the same tactic, but two could play at that game.

"And what is your interest?"

"Not what, who. For some time now, we have been keeping tabs on Raphael Cuthbert, ever since he joined the British Communist Party."

"So what?" Eleanor shrugged. "I'm only concerned with who murdered his mother, and I doubt it was him, though he does have a motive. Besides, it's a free country. The British Communist Party is not illegal, nor is it illegal to be a member."

Armitage sat back, crossed one leg over the other, and took out his cigarette case. He offered it to Eleanor, and when she waved a hand in refusal, took one and lit it before he answered her.

"It is illegal, however, to steal diamonds in South Africa and smuggle them into this country in order to fund the Party's activities."

Eleanor turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. "Has he done that? Where is your proof?"

"Oh, Cuthbert didn't steal them. He's never been to South Africa, as far as we know."

"Then I ask you again. Where is your proof?"

Armitage grimaced and drew on his cigarette. Eleanor, who knew him well, watched him debate how much to tell her, and waited. She was not going to help him if he wasn't prepared to trust her. She needed the facts and the truth.

"Well, we know that the diamonds were stolen some months back from the offices of a mining consortium in Kimberley. We also know that a package containing those diamonds was delivered to the Cuth-

bert residence three weeks ago, and we would like to know where they are and what he has done with them.”

“And that’s where I come in?”

“Yes.”

Eleanor began to feel her blood boil and her temper rise. Once again Armitage seemed determined to use her, but she would not be his cat’s paw – not without good reason, and so far he had failed to give her one.

“Forget it, Major. I have told you before that I will not snoop for you. If you think I am going back to Cuthbert House merely to pry into Raphael’s affairs, his room, or his belongings, then you can think again. Besides, he may have passed the diamonds on by now.”

The major shook his head and ran a thumb down his jaw, as if the scar pained him. “No, we’re pretty certain they are still somewhere on the property.”

How could Armitage be so sure of that? How could he know that the gems remained in the house? Unless...

Ah, of course. He must have someone on the inside. That would also explain something else that had been bothering her – how the major knew of her presence there. She certainly hadn’t informed him of her plans, and she suppressed a shiver at the thought of him keeping tabs on her.

Which of the occupants was Armitage’s insider? It was unlikely to be a member of the family, nor could she see Doctor Bernstein in the role. That left the servants and for a moment she considered Cripps, before dismissing him as well. The butler was too much his own man to work for Military Intelligence.

Her guess was that Aubrey Vernon was the person Armitage had recruited to be his eyes and ears inside Cuthbert House. The office Vernon worked in had its own direct telephone line, she recalled — easy enough to phone Peter without anyone being the wiser.

The impressionable young secretary would be like putty in the major's hands. Perhaps his life was so humdrum that the thought of espionage was thrilling and exciting by comparison. That might be true in wartime, when you were fighting for your own life as much as for King and Country, but it hardly applied in the current circumstances, when he was little more than a snoop.

And if he'd been caught doing so, then he might have faced the sack from his secretarial post. Had he murdered his employer for that reason?

Eleanor brought her gaze back to the man at the other end of the bench. "If your insider hasn't found the diamonds for you by now, what makes you think that I'll have better luck?"

A broad smile spread across the major's face. "I should have known you'd work that out. The fact is, our man hasn't found them, so their location is anyone's guess."

"Oh, I think I know where they are."

Armitage blinked. "You do? Can you get hold of them? Without any danger to yourself?"

Eleanor wasn't sure that she wanted to do anything of the sort. She didn't doubt that the gems had been stolen, and in that case no one at Cuthbert House had any right to them, but it would take a fire before she carried them out of the place in her possession. Even then, she'd help rescue the inmates first.

"What is it you are asking me to do, Peter? I can't believe that you expect me to steal the diamonds, even if they are already stolen property and Raphael has no right to them. You know me better than that."

He appeared genuinely surprised at the suggestion. "Indeed I do, my lady. Heavens, I wouldn't dream of asking you to take them, but if we know exactly where they are, then I can arrange with the police to have a search warrant raised."

"You could do that, now, if you are so sure they're at the house."

He shook his head. "We might, but then we'd have to ransack the place, and you know that's not my style. I'd rather know where they are hidden to start with. That way we can go in and out in one quick operation."

She nodded her acceptance of that. The major would always prefer a rapier over a broadsword.

"Yes, all right, but let me make sure first, rather than setting you off on a wild goose chase. In the meantime, tell me what you know of Arthur Cripps."

Armitage frowned and shook his head. "Nothing at all. I don't know the man."

"Really, Major, you surprise me. I thought you had a dossier on everybody."

"Then, I'm sorry to disappoint you, my lady." He laughed. "I take it you think Cripps the guilty party?"

Eleanor was merely fishing for information, in the same manner the major so often used. The police would know if anyone at Cuthbert House had a criminal record, but if Armitage was keeping an eye on someone other than Raphael, Eleanor wanted to know about it.

"Not at all. What of Doctor Emanuel Bernstein? Has he come to your attention?"

"Yes, but only because he's a Swiss national, although he also has a British passport. He trained as a medical doctor then as a chemist. We have nothing against him, at any rate."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"Oh?" He threw her a sharp glance, which she ignored. Let him have a taste of his own medicine for a change.

She got to her feet. "I'll make sure I know where your diamonds are and I'll meet you back here at the same time tomorrow."

"Very well, my lady. Thank you — and Ella..."

She had turned and started to walk away, but at his use of her wartime name she swung back.

"Be careful," he said. "I don't think young Cuthbert is a dangerous man, but someone in that house definitely is."

"There is no need to worry on that score, Major. I have my maid with me."

"Then you are in good hands," he said, and there was no irony in his tone.

Eleanor knew that. She had absolute faith in the plucky Tilly's ability to protect and defend them both.

Secretly pleased that it was she who had instigated her next meeting with Peter, she strolled at a leisurely pace to the park gates and didn't look back.



Chapter 21



Eleanor's meeting with Major Armitage had left her brain seething with questions.

Did Peter's own cat's paw have a motive to murder Irene? If Raphael had discovered Vernon searching his room, would he have gone to his mother and demanded she terminate the secretary's employment?

She thought back to the disagreement between mother and son on Monday evening before dinner. Did that have anything to do with Vernon? It seemed unlikely. Besides, Raphael might not have the physique of a fighting man, but he certainly had the temper. He was the type to have taken a swing at the intruder, not reported him to his mother.

On the other hand, perhaps Vernon hadn't located the diamonds because he hadn't actually looked for them, in which case he would never have been in Raphael's room and an altercation between them was nothing more than a wild imagining on her part.

Eleanor sighed.

It was largely academic. If she was right about where Raphael had stashed his stolen gems, then she needn't give too much thought to them and could concentrate on her own job.

By this time in her musing she had reached the wrought iron gates and, instead of turning right and going back to Cuthbert House immediately, she decided to take a detour on to the High Street, looking for the Town Hall and Register Office.

If Doctor Bernstein and Irene Cuthbert had really planned on marrying, it would be as well to check. They should already have registered their intent to do so if the date the doctor had given was correct.

She found the fine Victorian building easily enough, walked up the wide stone steps, and went through a set of half-glazed double doors into a spacious entrance hall. A number of Notices of Marriage forms were pinned to a board on a side wall. Eleanor stood in front of them, letting her eye scan along the row.

The people of Dulwich were clearly of a romantic disposition. No less than ten couples planned on marrying in June, among them a Mister Peace and a Miss Battle, and a Mr Brewer and a Miss Beer. Eleanor smiled to herself and made a note to tell Ann, who would find the juxtaposition of names screamingly funny. Eleanor wished them joy in their union and moved on.

When she found the two names she was looking for, she stared at the form and wondered again why the doctor had been so quick to vouchsafe the news of his marriage to Irene. Was it to prove that he had nothing to hide, that he had no motive for murder?

At least the form, with its elegant copperplate hand-writing proved he'd been telling the truth. Eleanor was pleased about that. She rather liked the man.

By rights, she should have turned away at that point, but something made her linger and check out the rest of the board. To her great surprise, the Cuthbert name also appeared on a form further along the row. This time it was twinned not with the name of Bernstein, but with Arthur Cripps, and the Cuthbert in question was Eugenie.

"Well, well," Eleanor muttered, tapping a forefinger against her lips, a large piece of lemon meringue pie coming suddenly to mind. "That's a turn-up."

She peered at the form, noting that it had been filled in only the previous day. This, perhaps, was the real reason that Eugenie had left the house and her supposed trip to the library was merely an excuse.

Eleanor stepped back and considered the implications of her discovery.

Her own reception by Irene gave the lie to Raphael and Diana's assertion that their mother was a snob, trying to attract women of wealth and title to the clinic. She would have been far more welcoming, more fawning, to her and Ann if that was the case.

However, that did not mean that she would have welcomed her daughter's marriage to a mere butler. Would she have vetoed it, if she had known about it?

More questions and still no answers. Up until now, Eleanor had been unable to think of a reason why Eugenie should kill her mother, but now, the last of Irene's offspring had a solid motive to get rid of her.

Eleanor ambled back towards Cuthbert House with a mind full of problems and a heart full of cares and dilemmas. Should she — or should she not — tell Diana what she had discovered?

It was possible that she already knew of her sister's fondness for the butler, and that news of an impending marriage would come as no surprise. Yet, at dinner the previous evening, Eugenie had made no mention of any marriage — hers, or her mother's. Perhaps she had not looked at the board before going in to see the registrar.

If Diana didn't know of their plans, then perhaps no one else in the house did either, any more than they were acquainted with those of their mother and Emanuel Bernstein.

Eleanor hoped that the doctor had been true to his word and informed Diana. If there was any likelihood of a hysterical reaction, she would rather he dealt with it.

Suddenly, the thought of going back into Cuthbert House was too much. Its secrets, its deceits overwhelmed her. She detested its skuldugery and even its liaisons. She wanted to turn around and flee back to Peter in the pavilion, except that the major would no longer be there. He would have gone about his business, as she must go about hers.

Her footsteps slowed, but she plodded on.

It was not in Eleanor's nature to be confrontational, but she needed to speak to the doctor again, and ask him — no, demand of him — why he and Irene had kept their wedding plans a secret. Whose idea had it been not to inform her family? It may have no bearing on Mrs Cuthbert's murder, but if someone had divined the pair's wedding plans and been determined to stop them, well...

By the same token, if Irene had discovered Eugenie and Arthur's love affair and forbidden them to marry, then they too had a motive.

"Botheration!" Eleanor spoke out loud, shocking an elderly lady walking past, who skittered out of her way, tutting with disapproval.

Annoyed at her own outburst, Eleanor picked up her pace and strode on towards Cuthbert House, determined to get answers from both the doctor and Diana.

On reaching the clinic, she put out her hand, but the door opened before she could press the bell.

"Oh, my apologies, your ladyship." Bernstein's firm grip on Eleanor's upper arm prevented her from pitching forward, stumbling over the sill, and falling to her hands and knees in a most unladylike fashion.

"Thank you, Doctor. I was hoping to have a word with you."

"Not now, my dear. I am just on my way to the post office." He waved an envelope at her. "I shall not be long, it is only in the High Street."

"Are the police still here?"

"No, they have gone and, as you can see, they have not arrested me."

He spread his arms wide and only then did Eleanor take in the way that he was dressed, in heavy overcoat and with a muffler around his neck.

"You won't need those," she assured him. "It is pleasantly mild out there."

"Ah, but the British weather is notoriously fickle," he replied. "I would not want to catch a chill." And with that he sketched a brief bow and marched smartly away.

Eleanor wasted no time. She closed the door on the doctor's re-treating back, and strode just as smartly along the corridor, past the treatment rooms, through the door and up the stairs to the laboratory.

She hated the thought of what she was about to do. Snooping did not come naturally to her. Like espionage it seemed underhand and dishonourable, and not the British way of doing things. The major would have disagreed with her, and she had no need of him to point out her own self-deception. She knew her country engaged in spying as much as any other, it was an essential part of homeland security, and she was being unrealistic to disdain it.

She was just being squeamish and haughty, too, in thinking the task beneath her. Ladies did not snoop, yet here she was doing exactly that. Telling herself that it was essential to solving this puzzle did not make her feel any better about herself.

With a sigh, she let her practised gaze sweep the room, taking in the sinks, the work benches, the drawers and cupboards, the racks of test tubes until it came to rest on the book containing Doctor Bernstein's notes.

She crossed quickly to the desk, but to her dismay the notes were written in German, a language she could neither speak nor read. To make matters worse the text was littered with abbreviations and a smattering of Latin.

She stared at his writings in disgust for a moment, then moved on to peer at the test tubes. They contained an oily, viscous fluid, that might be soap or the basis for a face cream. Interesting, but not the reason she was here.

Eleanor moved to a dresser set into an alcove and inspected the row of bottles on its shelves. They contained herbs and spices more fitting

to a kitchen than a laboratory. Amongst the comfrey, lavender and calendula, she noticed a surprising addition.

Her heart raced as she read the label.

Pennyroyal!

What on earth was that doing here? What possible use could it have in face creams and lotions?

Could the Cuthbert Clinic really be offering other, illegal, procedures along with its beauty treatments?



Chapter 22



Eleanor nearly knocked over a table holding glass retorts in her headlong rush to the door. She steadied it in time, and beat a hasty retreat down the stairs. The doctor could be back at any minute, and she no longer wanted to talk to him. Not before she'd spoken to Tilly and Ann, and checked her facts.

Downstairs, she looked for Diana and found her talking to Aubrey and Eugenie in the office.

"It's this murder," the secretary was saying. "They say — those that give a reason, that is — that they won't be back until the murderer is caught. They're afraid. You can hear it in their voices."

"Well, the police have no idea. If that Inspector Logan doesn't buck his ideas up, we'll be out of business soon." Eugenie did not appear in the slightest put out by the imminent closure of the family business.

"Then we must find more clients. At least now that Raphael has sobered up, he's agreed to work on more advertisements." Diana nodded, then caught sight of her guest. "Oh, Eleanor, you're back."

"Yes, I'm sorry that I was called away. Is now a good time for a chat?"

"Of course. It's not far off lunchtime, but come into the drawing room with me. I think Ann is in there, feeling rather bored."

Eleanor agreed, though she would far rather have spoken to Diana alone.

Ann, however, wasn't in the drawing room, though through the open French window they could hear her talking to Persephone in the garden.

"Has Doctor Bernstein said anything to you this morning?" Eleanor asked once she'd taken a seat.

Diana frowned. "Nothing more than usual. Why do you ask?"

Annoyed that Bernstein had reneged on his promise to advise the Cuthbert family of the arrangements he and Irene had made, Eleanor felt she had no option but to do the telling for him.

"Did you know that he and your mother planned to get married? The banns are up in the town hall."

"What? Really?" Diana sounded more surprised than shocked.

"Yes, I saw them there myself no more than an hour ago. I also saw someone else's."

Diana wasn't concerned with anyone else. "Why didn't they say anything?" She shook her head in perplexity. "It's not as if any of us would have objected. We've all known Emanuel long enough. We think of him as part of the family, anyway."

"I don't know why they didn't tell you. Doctor Bernstein remarked that your mother wished to pick the right moment to do so, but when I spoke to him he assured me that he would inform you now. He did admit that you had enough to deal with at the moment, so I think he was waiting until he found the right moment, too."

But that had been nearly twenty-four hours ago. Why had he still not done so?

Resolved to pose that question next time she saw him, Eleanor dismissed the doctor from her thoughts.

"Yes, that was probably it." Diana said. "He's a very kind and thoughtful man at heart."

Eleanor laughed. "You sound as if you wouldn't mind marrying him yourself."

Diana held up a hand. "No, no. Don't forget that for most of my life he has been a father figure to me and the others. It can't have been easy for him, but I think he made a good fist of it, which is why I say he is kind."

"Don't you want to get married?"

"I suppose so." Diana's face grew wistful. "I was rather fond of a young private in the army, once."

Eleanor winced. "I'm so sorry."

"Oh, it's not what you think. He's still alive. It was just that mother disapproved, she said he wasn't good enough, so he married a girl from Peckham."

Eleanor suppressed a giggle at this glaring non-sequitur and instead made sympathetic noises.

"What about you? Do you have a man in your life? Are you in love?"

Eleanor clamped down hard on thoughts of Peter Armitage and replied in the negative.

"Not at the moment, no. I'm fancy free."

"I'm beginning to think that if one wants to get married, then you have to grab a man by the ears and march him down the aisle before any one else does."

There was certainly a surfeit of women since the war, but that tactic was too extreme for Eleanor.

"Women should not be so forceful in this day and age."

"That sounds like a quote. Did the duke say that?"

Eleanor shook her head. The words were those of her mother, who had been talking of the perils of deterring a suitor. It had been a largely wasted lecture. Both the duchess and her daughter knew more subtle ways to get what they wanted.

"My mother thinks that I have a strong character, and that is off-putting to suitors. Unfortunately, her choice of eligible marriage partners is not mine." She shuddered. "I'd rather stay single than end up

shackled to some of her more outlandish suggestions, all of which she claims are suitable prospects."

Diana laughed. "Oh dear. Is it as bad as that?"

"It is no coincidence that I'm down here in London, while my match-making mother is at home on the family estate in Derbyshire. There's a good hundred and sixty miles between us."

"Don't you get on with her?"

"On the contrary." Eleanor thought of the beautiful, elegant woman that had born and raised her, who had cuddled her as a child and kissed away her hurts. Who had taught her to mix strength with gentleness and to conduct herself with dignity. She smiled broadly. "I love my mother and get on very well with her, but that's thanks in large part to those one hundred and sixty miles. She'll be happier if and when I do get married."

"I'm very envious of your relationship. I don't think our mother wanted us to marry."

Eleanor seized the chance to get back to discussing her morning's discovery. "I wonder what she would have said about Eugenie marrying Arthur Cripps."

"What?" Diana fell back in her chair, the blood draining from her face. "Is this some sort of a joke?"

"None at all. The banns are on display in the register office at the town hall along with your mother's and Doctor Bernstein's."

"But that's impossible. I had no inkling of any romance between them."

"Perhaps there wasn't any." Eleanor spoke her thoughts out loud. "Perhaps there's another reason for their wedding. Can you think of one?"

Diana sat bolt upright. "What are you implying, Eleanor? Are you suggesting—"

"That Eugenie is with child? No, not necessarily. It does seem odd, though, that those banns were only posted yesterday — Eugenie went

out, remember, supposedly to the library — only hours after your mother was murdered. I have to ask if there is a connection between those two events.”

“I should think there is an obvious one. Despite me not noticing, they are in love, and are now free to marry, so they went to the town hall to register and get a licence. Have you asked Eugenie?”

“No, I haven’t had a chance since I got back.”

“Then I suggest you do. I don’t believe that my sister’s morals are that lax that she would sleep with the butler, become pregnant, and murder mother in order to hide that fact. It’s preposterous.”

The thought of a pregnancy had only occurred to Eleanor after the discovery of that jar of pennyroyal in the laboratory. It added another facet to what was already a complex case. Did anyone, other than the doctor, know of the jar’s existence? Or pennyroyal’s uses? Eleanor did, though how she had come by that knowledge she could not now have said, but its ability to cause an abortion made it a dangerous, sometimes deadly, plant to have around.

The last thing Eleanor wanted was to get into an argument with Diana, or to do or say something that would lead to an irreparable rift between them. Although, right at this moment, she was sorely tempted to go upstairs and pack her bags.

And the major, came a nagging little voice from the back of her mind. What about him if you do that? She gave a mental shrug. She knew where his precious diamonds were, but how would Diana take the news of Raphael being in possession of stolen goods?

With an inward groan Eleanor put a smile on her face.

“Perhaps it would be better if I left it to the police. It was foolish of me to think that I could help when it’s your own family involved.”

She got to her feet at the same time that Doctor Bernstein entered the drawing room. He was holding a pretty blue parasol which he held out towards her. Eleanor’s heart sank.

"I take it this is yours, my lady." His eyes no longer twinkled. They glittered with malevolence.

Eleanor lifted her chin. "Yes it is."

"Then what the hell was it doing in my laboratory? How dare you go in there?" he shouted. "I am conducting important and sensitive experiments. Your blundering around could have ruined them. What was your reason for being there? Perhaps you'll explain that."

If the question had come at any other time, when she had not just had sharp words with her hostess, Eleanor would have offered profuse apologies and taken his censure as her due. As it was, she went on the attack.

"And perhaps you'll explain what pennyroyal is doing in your laboratory. What use does it have in beauty preparations?"

Diana's quick intake of breath was telling, but Bernstein's reaction surprised Eleanor. He took a step back at the same time as his brow puckered.

"What are you thinking? I am experimenting on its use as a muscle relaxant, though without success, and I chew the occasional leaf to freshen my breath. It tastes of spearmint." He thrust the parasol into Eleanor's hand, then marched to the drinks cupboard and proceeded to pour himself a drink. "You have a nasty suspicious mind, my lady."

Eleanor admitted it. A suspicious mind was essential in her line of work. "I am sorry, Herr Doktor, but Diana has asked me to investigate her mother's murder. I cannot do that without asking awkward, sometimes personal questions and poking my nose in places where it is not wanted. It appears that every member of her family, and you too, had a motive for wanting Irene dead. I have to examine those motives. However, if Diana has now reconsidered my involvement..." She looked at her friend and waited.

"Oh! I don't know," Diana cried. "Are you saying that all of us, me included, have a motive?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But, that's nonsense. Why would I kill mother?"

"To get your hands on her share of the business — a very profitable business according to Raphael. It also gives you the chance to take the company in a new direction and institute changes that you've admitted your mother did not approve of, but which you've wanted to instigate for some time. Look, Diana," she went on, "all I'm saying is —"

"You're accusing me of...of...oh." Diana put her head in her hands and burst into tears.

Doctor Bernstein put down his glass and hurried to Diana's side.

"Come, come, my dear. Do not upset yourself. We both know that neither you nor I are guilty of this heinous crime, but we must face facts. I fear that Lady Eleanor is correct. The police will no doubt have made the same wrong assumptions as her ladyship." He directed a glowering look at Eleanor.

"I'm not accusing you, Diana, but a case could — I only say could — be made against all of you, and I have to ask these painful questions in order to exonerate you. If the police have made the same assumptions — wrong or otherwise — any one of you could be arrested at any moment. Don't you see?"

The doctor did not appear convinced, but Diana nodded her head.

"Yes, I suppose so." She lifted her head, pushing back the mane of chestnut hair with her arm. She looked very vulnerable and for a moment the doctor's hand tightened on her shoulder. "And I do want you to stay and clear this up, Eleanor."

"Whatever the outcome?"

Diana let out a long shuddering breath. "Whatever the outcome," she said.



Chapter 23



Feeling more than a little cross with herself — she should have handled her talk with Diana and Doctor Bernstein in a more diplomatic manner — Eleanor carried the parasol upstairs, staring at the offending article that had got her into the doctor's bad books.

Thank goodness Diana had been there. Doctor Bernstein had been angry enough to lash out and hit Eleanor. He might even have used the parasol, and it was one of her favourites.

She entered her room and threw the parasol on the bed, then sat beside it and put her face in her hands. It was her own stupid fault for leaving the wretched thing behind when she fled the laboratory.

"You're useless as a detective, Eleanor Bakewell."

She shook her head, shivering slightly at the memory of Bernstein's malevolent glare. He wasn't so appealing without the twinkle in his eye.

With a determined effort she brushed these thoughts aside and concentrated on her morning's discoveries. It was easy enough to make a case against all her suspects, but where was she to find the evidence that would prove, or disprove, her theories?

She was still wondering about this when a tap came on the bedroom door, and Lady Ann hurried in.

"So, that's where you're hiding, darling. Shouldn't you be up and about sleuthing? I have been." Ann closed the door and sat on the chair by the dressing table. She looked remarkably pleased with herself. "Want to hear how I've got on?"

"Yes, please."

"I've been talking to Aubrey." Her eyebrows did their familiar waggle. "He's really rather sweet in a gauche sort of way. He said he didn't know why I had come to the clinic. I was already beautiful enough."

"Um hmm." Eleanor murmured, more anxious to know if the secretary had said anything about his employer's murder than his flattery of Ann.

"I asked him how many clients they had on their books, and he said close to fifty. As we know there have been some cancellations, but a couple of new customers have rung up wanting to go on the books. One woman even asked if the pool was open for swimming."

"I suppose that shouldn't surprise me."

"No, it shouldn't, you know how ghoulish some people can be. It's a wonder Raphael hasn't suggested it. Anyway, Aubrey then went on to tell me that Diana had asked him to place an advert with the London Times for more staff to work in the clinic, and to contact a few employment agencies, too."

"Really? That is interesting. She made no mention of it to me. I wonder if either Eugenie or Persephone have told her they are going to leave. I can think why Eugenie might."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Eleanor brought Ann up to date with her discoveries at the town hall.

"Well, I never," Ann said when she'd finished. "Another pair getting married? It seems a bit too much of a coincidence to me."

"Perhaps romance is in the air at Cuthbert House."

"Bah!" Ann dismissed Eleanor's attempt at levity. "Did you suspect that? Eugenie and the butler, I mean."

Eleanor opened her mouth, about to say, "not at all," but closed it again and frowned. "I don't know, perhaps I did."

"Are they the killers? I can't see Irene being too pleased about her daughter marrying a mere butler."

These were the same sentiments that Eleanor had expressed to herself earlier. Now Ann's words triggered a further thought.

"That doesn't mean that both Eugenie and Arthur Cripps are guilty. How many people would it have taken to drown her?"

"Only one, if she was hit first, like you said."

"Exactly."

"Anyway," Ann said, eager to impart the rest of her news, "Persephone won't be leaving. I've just had a long chat with her out in the garden. She thinks that Raphael killed their mother, and says she doesn't blame him in the slightest."

"Did she say why she thought her brother was guilty?"

Ann leaned forward and lowered her voice. "She claims she heard him moving about at some point in the small hours of the morning. She says there's a creaking floorboard just outside his bedroom door."

"He was probably only going to the bathroom." Eleanor flicked at her fringe. "Is everyone in this house lying, do you think? They all said they slept through the night and heard nothing. Now, Persephone is changing her story and, if she's telling the truth, neither she nor Raphael were asleep."

"The killer obviously wasn't. Perhaps the rest of them know who it is and are trying to cover up for him, or her. Or, perhaps they all had a hand in it?"

Eleanor gave the suggestion serious thought, eventually shaking her head.

"No, I can't see Diana asking us to stay, if that were the case. She'd want us out of the way as quickly as possible, then they could bluff things out with the police. Besides, I've just had a long chat with her that came perilously close to a falling out. Diana had the most to gain, but I'm almost convinced she's innocent."

"Almost?" Ann cocked her head to one side.

"Yes. I won't go further than that. They've all got motive. I know how Irene was enticed down the stairs, but I don't have the evidence, or the proof, to name the guilty party." She pounded her fist on her thigh.

"So what do we do now?"

"Go to lunch," Eleanor said, as a distant gong sounded. "I need to speak to Raphael and Persephone again, now. We'll see what he says when faced with his sister's claim."

Lunch was an excellent celery and Stilton soup, Eleanor's favourite, and she suspected that Tilly had had a lot to do with its making. It came with warm crusty rolls, and after her walk in the fresh air, Eleanor tucked in with relish.

All the family were present, but not Doctor Bernstein, who according to Diana had excused himself to run an important experiment and was having a sandwich in the laboratory.

"Has he forgiven me?" Eleanor asked. It brought a weak smile to Diana's face.

"For invading what he thinks of as his private domain, yes. I'm not so sure about the inference that he...well...you know." She crumbled a piece of roll, not looking at Eleanor.

"Yes, I did rather jump to conclusions there. I'm sorry."

"Oh, he was upset anyway because the police had been up there before you, and they'd put him through the mangle."

"Really? What about?"

Diana looked up. "I don't know, he didn't say. I think, though, that they must have discovered his intention to marry mother the same as you did."

"I didn't discover that. He told me and was quite open about it. So why didn't he tell the police?"

Diana gave a quick shrug, but said nothing.

Across the table Eugenie and Persephone spoke quietly together and Eleanor turned her attention to Raphael.

He appeared absorbed in his own thoughts and Eleanor wondered if he knew that he was under investigation by Military Intelligence. That, rather than his mother's murder, might explain his excessive drinking as well as the worried frown that puckered his features every now and again as he absently spooned soup into his mouth.

One thing Peter Armitage hadn't told her was how the diamonds had been traced to Raphael, but that was typical of the man. He only ever gave out sufficient information to do the job — enough and no more was his motto.

Even so, it struck her as odd that Raphael still had them in his possession. When the answer came to her she smiled inwardly, and felt a degree of sympathy for the dilemma he had placed himself in.

"I say, Raphael," she said in a conversational tone, "I thought you told me that you slept through on the night your mother was killed."

"That's right. I did."

"Liar! No you didn't." Persephone snapped at him in an unsisterly way. "I heard you up and about in the small hours."

"You couldn't have done. Besides, I thought you were supposed to have slept soundly yourself." He glared down the table at her.

"I thought I had, but I've since remembered that I did wake up and hear you."

"Liar, yourself. I did not leave my bed."

"Did you perhaps go to the bathroom?" Eleanor stepped in before the siblings had a shouting match.

"No, I did not. I didn't need to. If Seph really did hear someone, and wasn't just dreaming it, then it wasn't me."

He had met Eleanor's gaze throughout that little speech, and he gave every appearance of speaking the truth. She nodded at him as if accepting it as such, and turned her gaze on Persephone.

"What time was this, Persephone?"

The girl shrugged and picked up a glass of water which she cradled to her chest. "I didn't notice, I'm sorry. I thought it was Rapha because there's a loose floorboard outside his room."

"Yes, so you told Lady Ann. It's a shame you can't remember what time it was. It might have helped us pinpoint when Mrs Cuthbert went downstairs."

"Is that so important, Eleanor?" asked Diana.

"Yes, I think so. Did the police speak to you all this morning?"

"No, they didn't bother Eugenie and Persephone, they only spoke to Raphael and Doctor Bernstein and, briefly, to me."

Raphael yawned. "I wonder why they came. It was exactly the same questions as yesterday, so I gave them the same answers. Why not? It was the truth. If you ask me that Inspector Logan has no idea who killed mother."

Privately, Eleanor agreed with him, but then she wasn't exactly shining in the deduction department of late.

"Why didn't you speak to him, Persephone, now that you'd remembered about hearing someone about?"

"I've told you. Because I thought it was Raphael, and I'm not going to sneak on my own brother."

"Dear me," Ann murmured at Eleanor's side. "What a family."

Hidden by the table, Eleanor tapped Ann's foot in warning.

"Did any of you know that your mother was going to marry Doctor Bernstein? Or that Eugenie intends to marry Arthur Cripps?"

For a second after this announcement it was if all the air had been sucked out of the room. The silence was deafening, then — as Eleanor later told Tilly — the Cuthberts erupted into recriminations and name-calling.

"Eugenie, you're not?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Why shouldn't I? I love him."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Did mother know?"

"You can't marry him."

"I don't care what you think. It's none of your business."

The back and forth arguing lasted for several minutes before Eugenie threw Eleanor a glance that the doctor would have been proud of and fled from the room.

Diana followed her and Persephone followed Diana.

Raphael got to his feet with a roguish grin. "Nice work, Lady Sleuth. You really know how to light a fire under people, eh?"

"Hmm," Ann murmured, as he went out and left them on their own. "I thought that went rather well, don't you?"



Chapter 24



Despite Ann's teasing, Eleanor wasn't in the least put out by the reaction she had provoked. She had learned a lot of things from that little contretemps, among them that Eugenie had not informed her siblings of her marriage plans.

Nor was she surprised when Abigail rather than the butler turned up to clear the dishes — the butler would no doubt be otherwise engaged for some time.

The maid bobbed a curtsy. "Would you like coffee, my ladies? There's a pot ready in the kitchen, only I didn't know who was in 'ere."

"Yes, please." Eleanor and Ann chorused.

Ann waited for the maid to leave before saying, "I really should go back to town. I need to make sure that deliveries have been made and visit my bank. I also need to see about arranging costume hire for a masked ball at Lady Snettisham's."

"All right," Eleanor said. "I'll drop you back there, if you like, if you can give me half an hour or so."

"Are you sure? I thought you'd want to stay."

"Oh, I do, and I'll be back, but an hour or two away from this place wouldn't harm. Or even overnight. It would allow tempers to cool down, and there are a few things that I can be doing in London. I have chores to do as well as you. I'll leave Tilly to keep a watchful eye on the situation here."

Ten minutes later, Eleanor walked quietly down the corridor outside the family bedrooms, treading very carefully past the second door on the left. A board shifted under her foot with an ominous creak. It was hardly the clap of doom, and she wondered how Persephone could have heard it from the end of the corridor, even if it was in the dead of night. Either Raphael had a very heavy tread, or Persephone was possessed of an acute sense of hearing.

She stepped to the centre of the corridor and opened the single door on the right.

I should have done this first thing yesterday, she thought, with a scowl at her own dilatoriness.

If Eleanor's room was rose and Ann's hyacinth, then Irene's private sanctum should have been named lavender. It had no plaque upon the door, but the curtains, upholstery, even the drapes on the old fashioned four-poster bed were all of that colour, in one shade or another. Dark and light, deep and pale, the owner of Cuthbert House had wasted no surface on any other colour of the spectrum.

The qualms she had felt in the laboratory resurfaced and she did her best to brush them away, but this was the first case she'd undertaken where snooping had been necessary. In her previous cases she had relied almost entirely on talking to the people involved, asking what she hoped were pertinent questions, then sifting through the answers for clues.

That technique hadn't worked so well this time. She was still in the dark about so many things that she'd now been reduced to prying.

And she couldn't even blame Peter Armitage.

Eleanor closed the door quietly behind her. She pulled on a pair of thin cotton glove borrowed from Ann, and, with a small shudder of distaste, set to work.

The drawers of the dresser were the first to open to her gaze and inspection. She touched nothing, disturbed nothing, letting her eyes do the job for her. Petticoats and underwear, hosiery and corsetry, shawls

and fichus told as much about Irene's age as they did about her lack of a sense of style.

Moving on to the dressing table, Eleanor scanned the top and the array of pots and perfume bottles. It was no surprise to discover that all of the creams and cosmetics were the Cuthberts' own Karnak brand. Eleanor's mouth twisted into a wry smile; at least Irene practised what she preached.

A matching set of mirror, comb, and hairbrush sat on a silver tray next to a small glass bowl containing a cloisonné brooch and a pair of earrings. The stones in the latter might have been amethyst, or possibly only coloured glass. Lavender, naturally.

The bedside table provided greater interest. Inside its single drawer was a small fabric-bound notebook. Eleanor dithered for a second before she lifted it out and opened the cover.

She flicked through until she came upon a page with a list of names and figures — Raphael £10,000, Eugenie £5,000, and so on. Eleanor counted them up — all told there were a dozen items.

Not having thought to bring pen and paper with her, she attempted to memorise them. If necessary, she would come back later with writing implements, but she did not want to take anything away with her. It would be just her luck to run into someone in the passage outside and have some uncomfortable explaining to do. She did, however, carry the book to the window ledge where the light was better, and read through the list of names and figures again. Were these the amounts that she wished to bequeath in her will. Was she actually rewriting it as Eugenie had suggested?

Irene hadn't been given the chance. The amounts here, at least as far as her children were concerned, were substantially different from the ones that Diana had passed on.

There was nothing in the notebook about the length of time some of the recipients would have to wait for their mother's legacy and Eleanor wondered again at the reasoning behind it.

Was it mere vindictiveness on Irene's part, as some of her offspring appeared to think, or was it the mark of a caring mother — one who knew her children well enough to know that they were still too young, too immature, to handle their inheritance wisely? In the hot-headedness of youth, it was easy to see Raphael and Persephone in particular, blowing through large amounts of money in a short space of time.

Feeling that she had misjudged Irene Cuthbert, Eleanor put the notebook back where she had found it. Had the police seen it?

Surely, Logan wasn't that remiss that he had failed to search Irene's room? But, if they had done so, they'd been as careful as herself, for nothing in the drawers lay jumbled or disarranged. Perhaps one of the sisters, or a maid, had since set things to rights.

Someone had certainly been in and made the bed.

Eleanor turned away, then stopped when her foot kicked something on the floor between the bed and the bedside table. She knelt down and stared at a small clock, its glass smashed, its fingers set at two o'clock.

She left it where it was and regained her own room without being seen. Then she rang for Tilly.

"What's happening below stairs, Tilly?"

"Oh, there's ructions, right enough. It seems someone's let a cat out of the bag, so I reckon that was your doing."

Eleanor nodded. "I'm afraid so. The Cuthberts are closing ranks and I thought it necessary to shake them up a little bit. I discovered this morning that Cripps and Eugenie are planning on getting married. Did any of the servants know or suspect that? Was it common knowledge?"

"I hadn't got that impression, but if you remember, Mrs Barker said he had ideas above his station, so I reckon she must have guessed something like that was going on."

"What has Cripps got to say for himself?"

"Huh, not much. It was Abigail that heard the argument in the dining room, she was just about to fetch the plates back, but waited in the

hall while there were raised voices, not daring to go in. When she came to collect the coffee, she asked Mr Cripps straight out if it were true. He told her to keep a still tongue in her head. Said it were nobody's business but his own."

"On the whole I would agree with him, but this is murder and murder always lays everyone's business open to the bone."

Tilly nodded her head. "I'm glad I didn't have to put up with the police questioning me about the murder. It's shook everybody up below stairs. They are all giving each other odd looks."

"All right, old girl. Look, Lady Ann and I are returning to London. I shall be gone overnight, but I'll be back tomorrow. I have another appointment with Major Armitage."

"Do you want me to come with you, my lady?"

"No, I'd like you to stay here."

"But what about your dinner?" Tilly was aghast at the thought her mistress would go hungry — or worse, have to cook for herself.

"Don't worry. I shall probably go to Alfredo's. Now, this is what I'd like you to do."

Tilly sniffed on hearing her orders. "You do realise I can't be in two places at once? How am I supposed to keep an eye on him when he's upstairs and I'm down?"

"I suggest you excuse yourself from the kitchen and stay up here. You can lean over the bannisters and keep an eye on things from there. Just do your best."

"Very well, my lady."

Eleanor collected Ann and after a few words with Diana, drove her friend home to Knightsbridge before carrying on to her own apartment in Piccadilly.

Relieved to be away from Cuthbert House and in her own comfortable surroundings, Eleanor took off her coat and threw it over the back of the sofa.

She laughed out loud at the thought of what Tilly would have said had she been there to see her mistress's cavalier attitude to her clothes, then relaxed into her chair by the fireside.

For over an hour she remained deep in thought. She stirred herself for long enough to make a cup of tea and nibble a biscuit, then lapsed back into her brown study.

She went over everything that had happened since she and Ann had stepped over the threshold of Cuthbert House forty-eight hours ago, replaying every conversation, her mind probing the words, marking inconsistencies, noting the lies.

As the day turned into evening and the shadows lengthened around her, she sat on, going over everything again and again. In the silence of her own space she laid bare the mystery of Irene Cuthbert's death and her sharp intelligence found the culprit and the evidence to bring the crime home to them.

She was almost asleep when the doorbell rang.

"Is everything all right, my lady?" Peter Armitage pushed past her and into the apartment. "Why did you leave Cuthbert House?"

"Really, Major." Eleanor closed the door and followed him into the drawing room. "I don't see that I have to explain myself to you. If I wanted to return home for a short while why shouldn't I?"

Eleanor hadn't turned the lights on, but even in the semi-darkness she could tell how his keen glance swept the room before he turned towards her.

"Must you always misunderstand me?" he said. "Am I not allowed to worry about you and your welfare?"

She pressed a switch on a table lamp and almost wished she hadn't when she saw his scowling face.

"I suppose you called Cuthbert House and were informed of my departure, but Tilly would have told you I was fine. If you'd asked."

"She did, but I wanted to check that for myself. She said I'd find you here, or at Alfredo's."

Eleanor looked at her watch and only when she saw the time did she realise she was hungry.

"Yes, I'm just about to go there."

His saturnine face relaxed into a grin. "Then may I accompany you?"

Why not? She could use him as he used her, and run her conclusions past him. He would find and point out any flaws in her thinking and two heads were better than one.

"Yes, thank you, Peter. I'd like that very much."



Chapter 25



The memory of Peter Armitage's last kiss lingered on Eleanor's lips when she woke the next morning. It was a kiss that had told her much, and she smiled in drowsy pleasure at the remembrance.

Even more pleasing was that he had agreed with her reasoning in the Cuthbert case. As they had sat in Alfredo's there had been one thing that still intrigued her, though she had made no mention of it to the Major.

"So, what will you do, now that you've solved it?" he'd asked.

"Telephone Inspector Logan in the morning, tell him what I've worked out, and leave it with him, I suppose. Of course, I'll have to tell Diana, too."

"And the little job you were doing for me?"

"As I told you, I'm fairly sure I know where they are. Tilly is guarding them. I'll bring them to you when we rendezvous in the park tomorrow."

Eleanor looked forward to giving the major his diamonds and grinned as she got out of bed.

Later, she phoned Ann and gave her the news that she knew who the killer was and was going to Dulwich again.

"Do you want me to pick you up?"

"Sorry, darling, I got home to find several more commissions, so I'm going to be busy for a while. Let me know how you get on. I shall want the full story."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure you get it. Bye."

Inspector Logan, however was not so amenable. "Oh, so that's your idea, is it?" he said.

"Yes, you asked me to pass on anything I learned."

"Well...there may be something in that, I suppose. Leave it with us."

"I take it you found the alarm clock and the notebook in Mrs Cuthbert's room."

A long, drawn out sigh came from the other end of the line. "Yes, thank you, we did. Please don't assume we are clueless."

"But, Inspector, you might at least go to Cuthbert House and speak to —"

"Thank you, your ladyship. It's all under control. An arrest is imminent."

He put the phone down, and Eleanor cursed into thin air.

Convinced the police had an innocent man in their sights, Eleanor drove at a furious pace to Dulwich. She slowed for the turning towards Cuthbert House, allowing an ambulance coming from the opposite direction, its bell urgently clanging, to turn before her.

With her heart thumping in her chest, she followed it to her destination.

The ambulance men were out of their vehicle almost before it had stopped moving.

Eleanor was more circumspect and took care to park out of their way and lock the Lagonda before racing through the open doorway, her eyes searching for Tilly.

"Diana, what's happened?"

Her friend stood in the middle of the hall, clinging to Eugenie who was crying on her older sister's shoulder.

"It's Persephone. We think she's tried to drown herself in the pool."

"What?" Eleanor's mind raced. She had not expected this on her return to Dulwich. Had she got it all wrong? Must she revise her thinking in light of this devastating news? "Where's Tilly?"

"I'm here, my lady."

A somewhat bedraggled figure appeared on the stairs. Her hair was plastered to her head. Her fringe dripped, and she was wearing one of Eleanor's dresses. She dabbed at her forehead with a towel.

Eleanor took in the apparition in one quick glance. "Were you in time?"

"I think so, my lady. Doctor Bernstein sent me to phone for an ambulance while he tried to resuscitate Miss Persephone. I also called the police."

"Good girl. Is everybody in the house?"

"As far as I know, my lady."

The police were taking their time if Tilly had called them at the same time as the ambulance. Eleanor tapped her toe against the tiled floor in impatience. She had failed to convince Inspector Logan on the phone — could she do so in person?

"Have you found out who killed mother?" Diana's face was haggard at this latest tragedy to hit her family. "Was it Persephone? Did she try to kill herself in a fit of remorse?"

"She did nothing of the sort." Doctor Bernstein answered the question, striding into the hall from the passage to the pool.

"She's alive?"

"Yes, thank heavens. I performed a resuscitation manoeuvre, which got a small amount of water out of her lungs. The medics are still with her and she is alert, although she is refusing to go to hospital."

Eleanor was about to ask a question when a heavy tread behind her made her pause.

"What's happened? I got a call saying there'd been another drowning."

Inspector Logan, together with his sergeant and a constable trooped inside as if they were playing follow my leader. They made a beeline for Diana.

"What's been going on, Miss Cuthbert?"

Diana looked flustered. Her cheeks flushed, her mouth moved but made no sound. She pushed the clinging Eugenie away and stared at Eleanor with pleading eyes.

"Have you come to make an arrest?" Persephone, flanked by the two ambulance men, entered the hall. "Someone hit me and pushed me in the pool. I expect you to arrest Aubrey Vernon for that, and for murdering my mother."

She sagged a little after delivering this bombshell and one of the ambulance crew put an arm around her waist as if to hold her up.

"Harris, check him out, will you." Logan smiled at the girl as his sergeant strode to the office and disappeared inside. "How are you feeling, Miss Cuthbert?" He spoke kindly, showing a genuine concern for Persephone that surprised Eleanor. It revealed a human side to the man that had, so far, been hidden. She liked him the better for it. "I'm glad to see you came to no permanent harm. Are you sure it was Vernon that attacked you?"

"Quite sure. Please, I need to go and get out of my wet clothes. I'll answer your questions later."

"Yes, yes," said Bernstein. "You need to get dry and dressed, and wrapped in blankets if you can."

"Come on, sis, I'll help you." A smiling Eugenie crossed the hall, took her sister by the arm, and led her up the stairs. Logan made no attempt to stop them.

Tilly made room for them as they passed her on the half landing. She raised an eyebrow at Eleanor, who shook her head. She needed Tilly to stay where she was.

Where was Cripps? The door had been open when Eleanor and the ambulance crew had entered. She assumed that either Diana or Eugenie must have done it while they waited for assistance, so where was the butler?

Relieved of their burden, the medics had a quiet word with Doctor Bernstein and Diana.

"She'll be all right, but you may have to watch for concussion. Whoever got her out of the water did so quickly enough that she didn't take a lot in, we reckon."

Diana thanked them and walked them to the door.

"Let go of me, I didn't do anything."

The sergeant almost pulled the secretary from the office by his jacket sleeve. "Here he is, Inspector. He says he's been working and heard nothing of the brouhaha."

"A likely story," said Logan.

Eleanor agreed with him, but wondered how this all fitted in with the case she had so carefully and, she thought, thoroughly worked out. How should she position this latest complication to still make sense of it all? She leaned back against the wall, glanced up at Tilly still standing on the stairs, and lowered her head, deep in thought.

"Did anyone see the incident?" Logan looked around him at the people gathered in the hall. "No?" he said when no one answered him. "Then how was she found in time?"

"That was me, Inspector," Tilly said. "I was clearing away breakfast things in the dining room when I heard a cry followed by running footsteps."

"And you are?"

"Tilly Walton, sir, Lady Eleanor's maid. I was helping out the kitchen staff."

"Go on. What time was this?"

"About half an hour ago, as far as I can tell."

"So, you heard a cry and then running footsteps. Did you see who that was?"

Tilly shook her head, her face crestfallen. "No, sir, I didn't. I had my hands full of pots at the time and by the time I'd put them down and gone into the hall, they'd stopped and there was no one about."

"Hmm, a pity." Inspector Logan ran a hand around his chin. At his shoulder, Sergeant Harris wrote everything down in his notebook. "So, what did you do then?"

"Well, sir, the door to the pool room was open, and remembering what had happened to Mrs Cuthbert, and the cry and all, I raced down the corridor, saw Miss Persephone in the water, and went and got her out."

"You called for me as you went," Doctor Bernstein put in. "There's no doubt that your prompt actions saved the day, young lady."

Tilly blushed and bobbed a curtsy.

"Where were you at the time, Doctor?" asked Logan. "In fact, where was everybody?"

"Eugenie, the doctor, and myself were in the dining room" Diana said. "Persephone had left us only five minutes before. I thought she'd gone upstairs to her room."

"And Mr Raphael?"

It was a question Eleanor had been pondering for some time. That and the whereabouts of the still absent butler.

"He had an early morning appointment in Dulwich and Cripps has driven him there. I expect them back at any moment."

"And did anyone see Vernon this morning before my sergeant dragged him out of his bolthole?"

There was a general shaking of heads in response to this. Eleanor wondered why, if the secretary had pushed Persephone into the pool, he had then returned to the office. Wouldn't he have fled the building?


Perhaps he thought she would die and no one would suspect him. But why? Why had he done it?

She stole a glance at his face. He appeared to be staring intently, even longingly, at Tilly.


A Tilly who was standing right next to the plinth on which the bust of Nefertiti sat in solitary splendour.

Eleanor's lips curved into a smile of satisfaction when the answer came to her. Ah, so that was it.

And the last piece of the puzzle slotted into place.



Chapter 26



Eleanor was just congratulating herself on at last seeing the full picture of this convoluted case when she heard a car door slam. Within a moment Raphael and Cripps walked through the still open front door.

“What’s going off?” Raphael asked, taking in the sight of three policeman. “We’ve just passed an ambulance that appeared to be driving away from here. Is everyone all right?”

Ignoring the question and before anyone else could answer, Inspector Logan asked one of his own.

“Where have you been, Mr Cuthbert?”

“To see my doctor — not that that’s any business of yours.” He looked at Diana, now standing close to Doctor Bernstein. “What’s happened?”

The newcomers were quickly brought up to date on the events since their departure, at which point Raphael threatened to deal with the secretary in his own way.

“You little tick. You turncoat. I ought to punch your lights out.” Fist raised, he took a step towards the hapless Vernon who cowered back behind the imposing bulk of the sergeant.

“Now then, none of that,” Logan snapped. He turned to Diana. “Miss Cuthbert, would you be so kind as to ask if your sisters will join us, please? Perhaps we might use your drawing room?”

“Yes, of course. Go on through.”

She strode to the stairs and Eleanor joined the rest, with the exception of the constable, who Logan directed to stay at the door and let no one leave, in the more comfortable surroundings of the Cuthbert's main living space.

Sergeant Harris had marched his prisoner to a small writing table and seated him in an upright chair. Eleanor, Raphael, and the doctor sat in easy chairs, while Cripps stationed himself by the door, and the Inspector paced back and forth between the hearthrug and the secretary.

Ten minutes elapsed before the Cuthbert sisters walked into the drawing room and took their seats, side by side, on the sofa. In that time, Doctor Bernstein had held a whispered conversation with Raphael who continued to glower at Vernon. That young man was being urged by Inspector Logan to confess — not only to the attempted murder of Persephone, but also to the murder of Mrs Cuthbert.

Eleanor sighed in frustration and listened to the secretary's vehement denials.

"How are you feeling now, my dear?" Doctor Bernstein enquired of Persephone. "No dizziness? No nausea?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Good, well, if you do feel unwell, speak up." He glanced at Logan. "I will not have her browbeaten, Inspector."

"Certainly not." Inspector Logan looked offended.

"I shall be all right. Why is Aubrey still here? Why haven't you arrested him?"

"I'd like to ask you a few more questions about that, if I may? You say he murdered your mother. Why did you say that?"

Persephone began to play with a lock of still wet hair. "It's obvious, isn't it? He hit me and pushed me in the pool, so he must have done the same to mother."

Eleanor could contain herself no longer. Her voice rang out, sharp and clear before the Inspector could reply. "What did he hit you with?"

Persephone frowned and looked at Logan as if asking if she should answer this.

"It's a good question. Please answer her ladyship." He whispered something to the sergeant, who promptly left the room.

Eleanor suspected he'd been sent, somewhat belatedly, to search the office.

"I don't know, but there must have been something because it nearly knocked me out."

"Isn't it possible," Eleanor said gently, "that he only pushed you into the water when you refused to run away with him, and that you might have hit your head on the side of the pool?"

There was a stunned silence at Eleanor's words. Diana hugged her sister to her as she stuttered, "I...I...I don't know."

"It is true that I saw no sign of a contusion such as there was with Irene," the doctor said. "So, your surmise is a possibility, your ladyship."

"Well?" The Inspector barked at Vernon. "Did it happen like that?"

"I didn't mean to hurt her. We had an argument and I lost my temper and pushed her in."

"And Mrs Cuthbert? I suppose you didn't mean to hurt her, too."

"I had nothing to do with that."

Eleanor bit back a sigh. "Come, Inspector Logan, Vernon wasn't planning on running away with his employer. This morning's affair was little more than a lover's quarrel. He did not kill Mrs Cuthbert."

"Yes, I've heard your theory, thank you, your ladyship. In my opinion it is nonsense. I think you'd —"

"Excuse me, guv." The constable put his head around the door. "There's a bloke here wants to speak to you."

"Not now, Downing. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"He says it's important. He's a major, or something, and he says he's got important information about this case."

Eleanor glanced at her wristwatch, only now remembering that she was supposed to have met the major twenty minutes ago. Was he

checking up on her, or had he merely come to reclaim the stolen diamonds? For once she didn't mind. It would be good to have his back-up.

Logan ground his teeth and gave every appearance of venting steam out of his ears as he threw his hands in the air and, scowling furiously, stomped out of the room.

"Is it true, Eleanor?" Diana's voice trembled. "Do you really know who killed mother?"

Eleanor wondered if her friend was now regretting asking her to investigate and saying that she wanted to know whatever the outcome. Be careful what you wish for, as they say. It was all coming very close to home and Diana's face betrayed her fears.

"Yes, I know. I've known who the culprits were since yesterday afternoon, though I neither suspected, nor expected an attack on Persephone."

Frankly, she could not have prevented it, but that didn't stop her feeling a twinge of guilt. Persephone had said she had a boyfriend, someone she saw every day and Eleanor had thought at the time that she must mean Aubrey Vernon. However, she had also confided that her beau had dreams of riches, and Eleanor had failed to make the connection to the stolen diamonds. Until she'd looked at his face just now in the hall, that is.

Her knowledge would tear this family apart. Despite that, and the very real sympathy she felt for her old friend, Eleanor would not back out now.

The Inspector's raised voice reached her from the hall. The major, on the other hand, had a deep rumble that sounded firm, but quieter and more controlled. No doubt he would get his way. He usually did.

A few moments later the Inspector returned, throwing a filthy look at Aubrey Vernon before rounding on Eleanor.

"All right, your ladyship, it seems this case has ramifications I knew nothing about, but I've been told to listen to you. I'll say now that I

don't hold with amateurs trying to teach professionals their job, but I'm a fair man and I'll give it a go. I warn you, though, that I'll not take kindly to any airy-fairy theories. You'll have to prove what you say."

Eleanor nodded, sat up a little straighter, and took a deep breath.

"Thank you. This hasn't been an easy case to solve, primarily because everybody had a motive to murder Irene Cuthbert. I was truly surprised at how little love her own family seemed to have for their mother. Even Doctor Bernstein, who had known her a long time, called her a remarkable woman and intended to marry her, did not appear grief-stricken at her death." She held up a hand to forestall the inevitable protests. "Still, I am aware that grief can take many forms. I am merely giving you my perceptions."

"Diana, do you and your sisters wear pyjamas?"

Diana frowned at the apparent randomness of the question. "Yes, we all do."

"What colour are they?"

"Um...mine are ivory satin, Eugenie's blue, and Persephone's emerald green."

Eleanor nodded. "I awoke early on Tuesday morning at around half-past six. I had slept well enough, and felt eager for the new day. The sun was shining and I threw up the casement window and leaned out. I caught sight of two strips of blue fabric waving in the breeze, trapped between the casement and the sill of a window away to my right. They were darker at the ends, as if they'd recently been wet."

"So?" Raphael sneered. "What does that prove?"

"In and of itself, precisely nothing, but this was before I knew that Mrs Cuthbert had been murdered. It was to take on far greater significance later on when Persephone told me that the window in question was in Eugenie's room, and later still when Eugenie admitted she hated her mother. 'We're all glad she's gone', she said."

"Are you saying that Eugenie killed mother?" Diana demanded. "That's ridiculous. What did she stand to gain? She lost her allowance and has to wait nearly two years for her inheritance."

"She stood to gain her freedom. The freedom to marry her lover and co-conspirator."

"And who might that be?" Logan's glance swept the room before coming back to Eleanor. He had been listening intently so far, and now she had his complete attention.

"Arthur Cripps, the butler."

"Rubbish," Eugenie said. Her nostrils flared. "How dare you keep suggesting such a thing."

"Why do you still deny it? I told you yesterday that I'd been to the town hall and your wedding banns are posted there for all to see, along with those of your mother and Doctor Bernstein. I'm sure that the Inspector knows of their existence."

"I do. I checked after your phone call this morning, but I'd like to know how Cripps was involved with the murder." Logan moved his position, the better to keep an eye on his new quarry.

The butler maintained his stance by the door. Eleanor hoped the constable was still by the front door should the man decide to make a run for it.

"On Monday night," she said, "Mrs Barker, the cook, made everyone below stairs a milky drink, as she did every evening before bedtime, but on that night Cripps added a sleeping powder. He wanted none of the servants to hear what he was up to, especially not young Edie, who was normally the first to wake in order to tend the fire.

"Then, when everyone was fast asleep he opened the pool room's rear doors and left them wide. As they can only be opened from the inside it must have been someone in the house that did that. Then, Cripps waited with a log of firewood in his hand, for his accomplice, Eugenie, to bring her mother down."

"Oh, my God." Diana put her face in her hands.

"Eugenie went to wake her mother at around two o'clock. I imagine that Mrs Cuthbert, woken suddenly, came to with a start and knocked her alarm clock onto the floor for it had stopped at precisely that time. Eugenie failed to spot it, but I think the police saw it there because Inspector Logan asked the servants what they were doing at that time."

Logan nodded. "Go on."

"The rest, I think, is self-explanatory — the bang on the head, the shock of the cold water. The only mistake they made was Cripps' failure to leave the doors open. If he had not locked them again, they might have been able to hang on to the story that someone had broken in and committed the murder. I heard them arguing about it in the hall yesterday morning. Eugenie was urging him to tell the police that he'd left the French window unlocked and to do so straight away." She looked up at Logan. "I take it he didn't?"

The Inspector shook his head, but said nothing.

"Although you all maintained that someone had broken in," Eleanor went on, "it was obvious that no one from outside could be responsible."

"What about Raphael?" asked Persephone. "I told you I heard him moving about."

"The heck you did. I was asleep all night." He scowled across at his youngest sister.

"I doubt you would have heard anything at that distance, but you may have heard Eugenie and your mother. If they were walking abreast down the corridor one of them may well have trod on the creaking floorboard."

"Is this true, Eugenie?" Doctor Bernstein turned a sad gaze upon the trio on the sofa.

She shook her head. "I'm not saying anything without a solicitor present."

"Right, then." Logan rubbed his hands. "I must ask you, Eugenie Cuthbert, and you, Arthur Cripps, to accompany me to the station for further questioning."

A scuffle in the doorway followed his words and Eleanor turned to see the butler, eyes blazing with fury, in the firm grip of Peter Armitage. He winked at her and she turned away, covering her mouth with a hand.

"What about Aubrey?" asked Persephone. "Aren't you going to charge him?"


"Blimey!" muttered Logan, looking harassed. "I should have brought more men. I'm going to have the whole family in a minute." He smiled at Persephone. "That depends on you, Miss. Do you wish to press charges against him?"

"Well, Seph?" said Diana, when her sister remained silent. "Do you? I shan't be keeping Vernon on here, whatever you decide. His employment at the Cuthbert Clinic is terminated forthwith."


For a fleeting moment, Eleanor saw a flash of Irene in Diana's dark eyes, and suppressed a shudder. If, as the saying had it, all daughters turned into their mothers, then the future for the family looked bleak.

She couldn't wait to get away from this house of dashed hopes and broken dreams.

However, there was a small matter to attend to before she did. One that, for once, she was looking forward to.



Chapter 27



Eleanor stayed where she was for the short time it took for the police to take away their prisoners and clear the house.

Much to her disappointment, for it showed the vindictive Cuthbert trait that she hoped had passed by the girl, Persephone decided to prosecute and Aubrey went with them.

Raphael, however, did not. This fact surprised Eleanor and she supposed Major Armitage had, for his own unfathomable reasons, not pressed for an arrest. He could have done so — being in receipt of stolen goods was a criminal offence.

Eleanor dismissed the thought and turned her attention to Diana.

"I'm sorry, Diana."

"Are you quite, quite sure?" Diana pushed hair off her forehead. She looked pale and haggard, as though she had aged ten years in a matter of days. It would take far more than the clinic's beauty treatments to restore the bloom to her face.

"Yes, I'm afraid I am."

"Well, we'll stand by Eugenie whatever happens," the doctor remarked.

"She might get away with manslaughter if we all speak up about mother's cruelty." Raphael's suggestion was greeted by nods of the head.

Eleanor said nothing, though the doctor's comment surprised her. What had he said about seeing someone hang? She did not fault him for the change of heart.

As to the lesser charge of manslaughter, law was not her area of expertise and it had been a cold and premeditated crime.

She got to her feet and went out into the hallway, looking for Tilly and the major.

The latter was closing the front door after the police's departure, while her maid sat somewhat forlornly on the stair, as if she had been forgotten.

Dear, dependable, loyal Tilly. Still on guard where her mistress had instructed. Eleanor brushed aside any comparison to the family's faithful Labrador dogs and smiled up at her as the maid got to her feet.

"Well done, Tilly. Thank you."

Armitage spun around at her voice. "Well done, yourself. Another feather in your cap, my lady."

"Pouf! I can't say the same for you, Major. Your chosen informer is up on charges of assault. You must be slipping in your assessment of people."

The major grimaced. "You don't pull your punches, do you, Ella? I take it you know where the diamonds are?"

Eleanor sucked in air through her teeth. "Of course. I told you I did. Why didn't you have Raphael arrested?"

His answer to that question was unexpected. She hadn't thought him capable of such finer feeling.

"I thought the family had enough on their plate without me adding to it. I'm hoping that a strong talking to will be enough to mend the young man's ways. Perhaps you'd ask him to come out here, then go and fetch the diamonds, please."

She turned away, grinning to herself, and re-entered the drawing room.

"Raphael, can you spare me a minute, please?"

He looked puzzled, but she'd kept her voice light, and he came towards her with a smile.

"Yes, what can I do for you? I thought you'd be packing to leave." He sighted Armitage and the smile faded. He couldn't have known who he was, but knew trouble when he saw it.

"Mr Cuthbert, I'm Major Armitage of Military Intelligence."

With a roar Raphael raced between Eleanor and the major and up the stairs, but Tilly was too quick for him. She grabbed the bust of Nefertiti in both hands and kicked the wooden plinth with her foot, sending it rolling down the stairs to crash into Raphael and knock him flat.

"They're in there? In that bust thing?" An incredulous major was wide-eyed as he hauled the groaning Raphael to his feet.

Eleanor grinned. "Safest place for them. Right under everyone's nose." She didn't bother telling him how she'd seen Raphael kissing the head, an action that had given away his hiding place. Let him think her cleverer than that.

The noise of the crash had brought everyone out of the drawing room. They stared at the tableau at the base of the stairs. Then the door bell rang.

"That'll be my man," Armitage said. "In the absence of a butler, my lady..."

Eleanor opened the door and stood back.

The major took control of the situation. He explained who he was, and why he was there, much to the consternation of the remaining members of the family.

"Is this true, Raphael?" Diana looked perplexed. "You've got diamonds?"

Her brother nodded sullenly and admitted that the jewels were in a small cloth bag deep inside the outer clay shell of Nefertiti's beautiful head.

"You'll have to smash it. I couldn't bring myself to do it," he said, confirming Eleanor's assumption of why he had hung on to the gems.

The major let go of him and took the head from Tilly.

"I won't press charges in this instance, but if you ever do the like again, rest assured I will bring the full weight of the law down around your ears. By all means be a communist, but you'd do far better to use your talent for a greater good. Either way, Cuthbert, make sure you stay within the law."

The young man nodded and, apparently chastened, wandered back into the drawing room. Eleanor suspected he would head straight for the drinks cabinet.

Persephone and Doctor Bernstein followed him, but Diana stood in front of Eleanor, wringing her hands.

"I shall be glad when this day is over. How many more shocks have we in store?"

"None, I hope. I'll be taking my leave shortly, my maid has just gone up to pack, but I wish you well, Diana. I'm sorry things worked out the way they did, but I've enjoyed meeting up with you again."

A little later the Lagonda pulled away from Cuthbert House for the last time.

"I can't wait to get home, Tilly. Another case successfully concluded."

"Did she pay you?" asked the ever practical Tilly.

Eleanor shrugged. She wasn't a private enquiry agent for the money, she had plenty of that as it was. "No, she didn't offer anything, and I didn't ask. I shall, however be going out this evening."

Peter Armitage would be her escort yet again, and that was payment enough. Her heart sang at the thought.

"Oh? Would that be with the major, my lady?"

"Yes, old girl. He wants to hear how I unscrambled his case for him, so he's taking me for dinner at the Ritz."

"Oh, really?" Tilly's sniff held the merest trace of disapproval. "Very nice, my lady."

Eleanor smiled broadly at her maid's response, and turned the Lagonda towards home.



The End.

Author's Notes



PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT was a real person who lived around 1500BC. According to the walls of her mortuary temple she did fund an expedition to the Land of Punt which brought back many trade goods including frankincense and myrrh. Hatshepsut is recorded grinding charred frankincense to make kohl, though I doubt that she did it herself.

She probably kept an army of Tillys to do it for her.

Nefertiti was not a pharaoh. She was the Great Royal Wife of the Pharaoh Akhenaten who lived some 150 years after Hatshepsut. The famous bust of her was found in the workshop of a sculptor in Amarna in 1912 by a German archaeological team.

The bust arrived in Germany in 1913 but was not put on public display until 1924 – the same year as *A Drowning in Dulwich* is set – so none of the characters would have ever seen it and Raphael is unlikely to have even set eyes on a photograph, so would have had no chance to copy it. I hope I may be forgiven this piece of author licence. I thought it an excellent place to conceal stolen gems.

The original is made not of clay, but of limestone and stucco and is currently in the Neues Museum in Berlin.

David Roberts was also a real person, though he lived much later than either of the above. Born in Scotland in 1796 he spent a long time in the near East, travelling widely and drawing and painting as he went. On his return his sketches were used as the basis for a series of lithographic prints that were published between 1842-1849 under the (amazingly unwieldy) title of *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, and Nubia*.

I apologise to the residents of Dulwich for endowing them with a town hall that they do not otherwise possess. However, it used to have a pub called *The Crown*, opposite another hostelry named *The Grey-*

hound. Both were demolished just prior to 1900 and a new one built on the site of *The Crown*, aptly designated *The Crown and Greyhound*. I cannot speak for the prettiness of the then landlord's daughter, but I'm sure it was well frequented, nevertheless.

Thank you for reading *A Drowning In Dulwich*. I hope you enjoyed it.

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WITHDRAWN

London 1924.

Private enquiry agent Lady Eleanor Bakewell looks forward to a relaxing few days at the Cuthbert Health and Beauty Clinic, where Irene, the owner, claims to have rediscovered the beauty secrets of Ancient Egypt.

But, when Irene is drowned in the clinic's exotic Egyptian pool the pampering has to stop.

Convinced her death is murder, and that everyone in the house has a motive, Eleanor must uncover more than just beauty secrets if she is to bring a killer to justice.

ISBN 9798539146382



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KR-642-310